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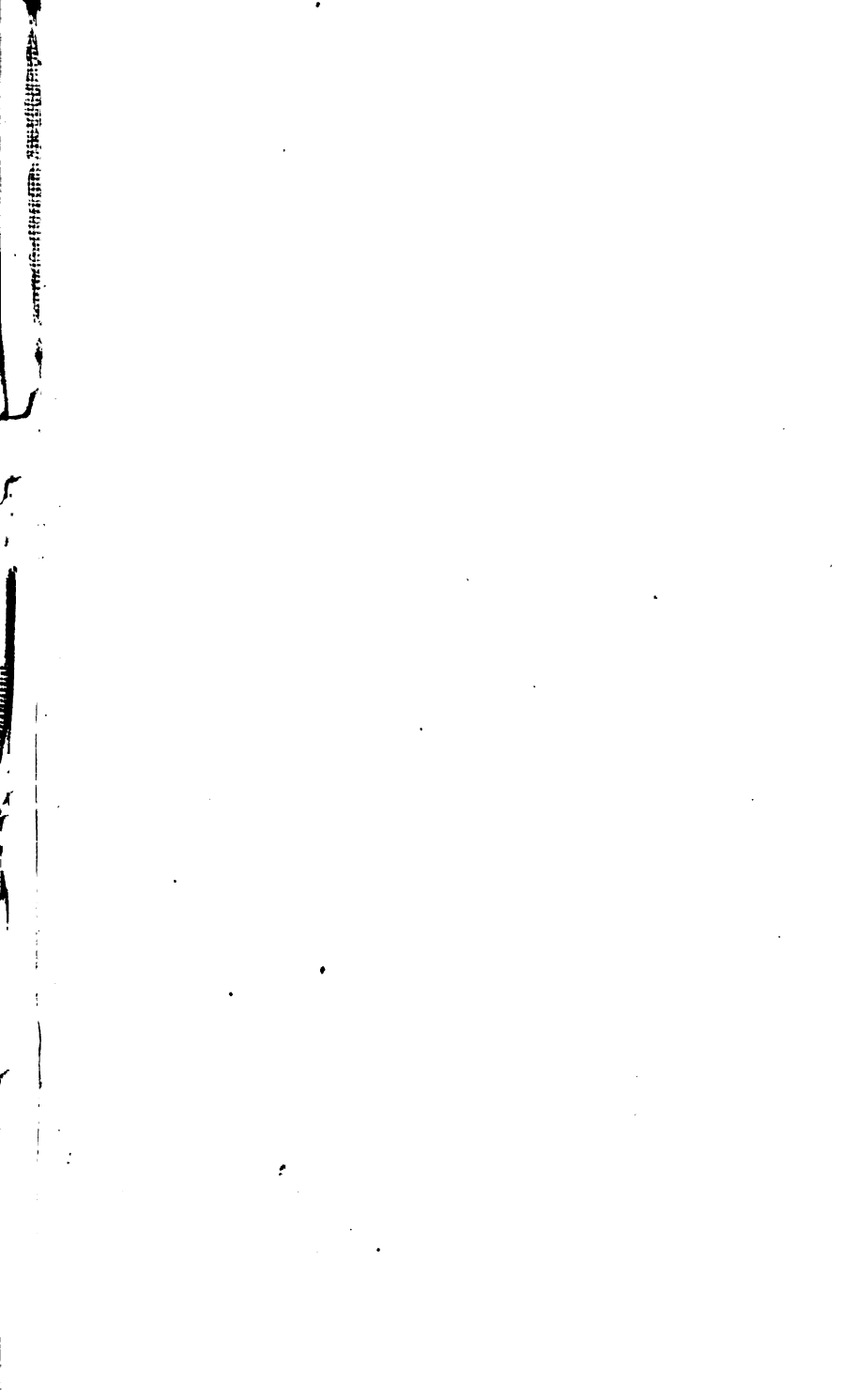
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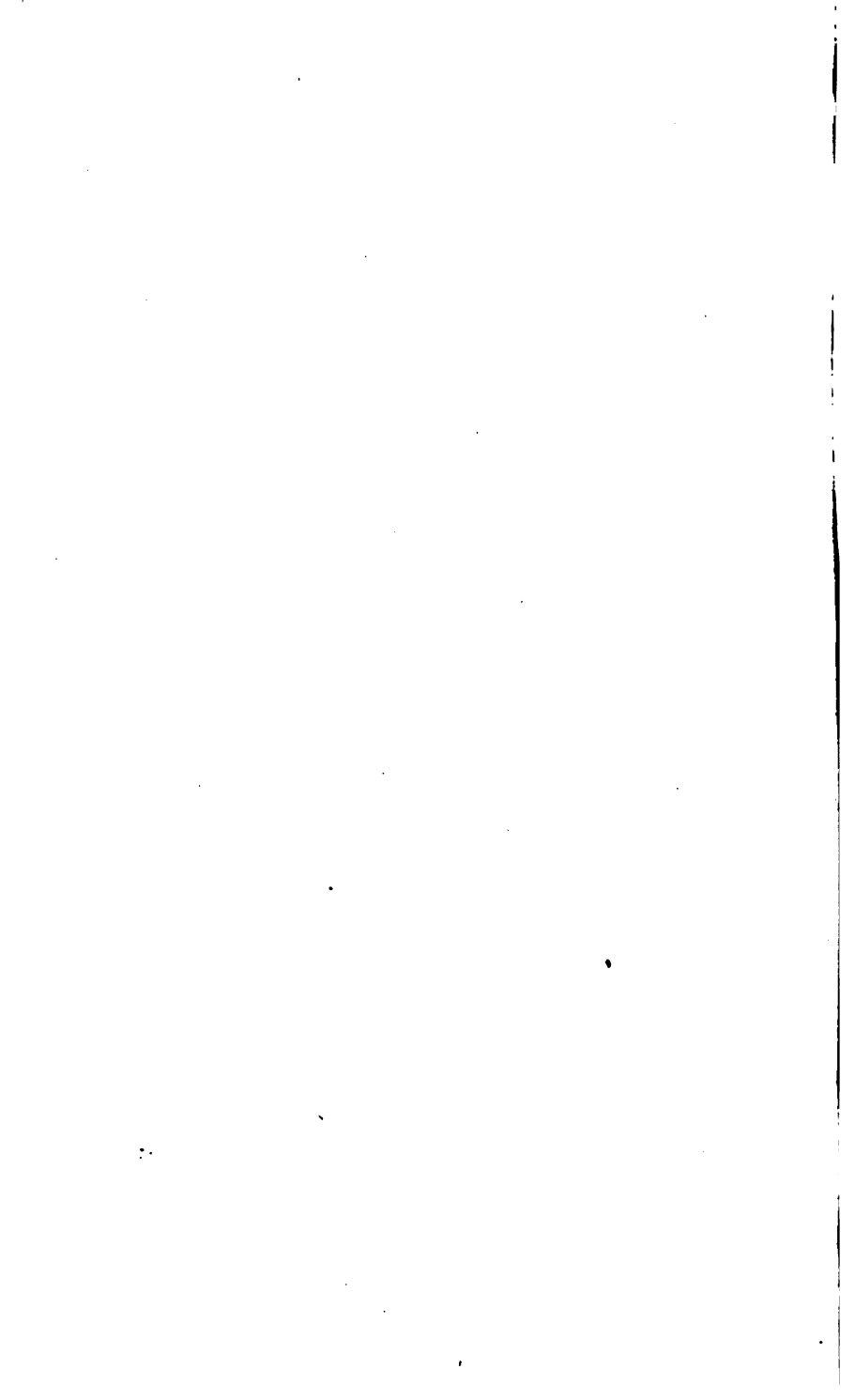
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THE
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

A NOVEL.

BY MISS PARDOE,

AUTHOR OF "THE CITY OF THE SULTAN,"
"LOUIS XIV. AND THE COURT OF FRANCE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY,"
"THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRETTY WOMAN," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

CHAPTER I.

THE receipt of his cousin's letter at once hastened the return of Mortimer to Westrum, which he reached in the hope that he might anticipate her departure. We have already shown that he failed in his object; nor was his regret lessened by the desolate sensation created by the aspect of a companionless house. Amid all his self-blame—for that he did feel much is certain, however unwilling he might be to admit the fact to himself—his annoyance was, moreover, increased upon perceiving around him every object on which his eye had been accustomed to rest: and of which he was well aware that Gertrude was the actual owner. There stood her piano—and he knew the value that she attached to it; here were her books—the chosen

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friends of her retirement—nay, the key placed in his hand by the weeping Roberts, and which opened a small inlaid cabinet, the bequest of his dead father to a niece whom he loved as a child, soon convinced him that, even to the graceful ornaments which all women prize so highly, she had left everything behind.

For a time, Mortimer felt as though there were a tacit reproach in this self-denudation on the part of his absent cousin; but a moment's reflection enabled him to do her better justice; and he was deeply impressed by the intuitive delicacy of her proceeding.

His first care was to give earnest instructions to Mrs. Roberts to cause everything, however trifling, which had been the property of her young mistress, to be carefully collected; and, this done, he accompanied the willing waiting-woman through the principal apartments, and bade her point out every object for which she had heard his cousin profess any preference or regard, and add them to the rest. The packages were then made; and the heart of Frederic felt lighter as he saw them driven from the door.

During his ramble through the grounds that evening, he was almost happy in the knowledge that Gertrude would find comfort and con-

solation in the accustomed objects thus restored to her; and as the deer, wearied of waiting for the kind notice of their gentle mistress, approached him to claim his caress, and appeared to demand, with their mild eyes, tidings of their missing playmate, he almost smiled as he responded to their mute but intelligible inquiry.

Poverty could not now subject his cousin to *every* species of privation; and the period of her exile must soon terminate; for had not Sybil, his own high-hearted Sybil, reminded him that her proper home would soon be beneath his own roof? Frederic had forgotten that women seldom forgive even a shadow of rivalry.

The letter which he had despatched to Gertrude to announce the departure of her property, was almost buoyant; for, delighted to have thus, in some degree, made compensation for his other short-comings, he forgot, in the prospect of her temporary gratulation, the more enduring evils by which she was surrounded; and, after reproaching her for leaving Westrum without affording him the opportunity of accompanying her to her new residence, he reminded her that, ere long, he should reclaim her at the hands of her present hostess; and painted the future in colours bright enough to scare her spirit as she contrasted

them with the hues of the present; and felt the utter impossibility of their ultimate realisation.

It was, consequently, in an enviable frame of mind that he started, on the following morning, for The Grange. Sybil was not yet apprised of his arrival, of which he had abstained from acquainting her, anxious to enjoy, to the fullest extent, the delight of her surprise; but, before we accompany him to this new meeting with his affianced bride, we must conduct our readers to the luxurious abode of the proud beauty, and introduce them to a new acquaintance.

Among the other characteristics of the pleasure-grounds of The Grange, was a long walk fringed with superb laurels, which traversed an exotic shrubbery at some distance from the house, and formed a delightful retreat during the more sultry portion of the day.

As Mortimer was leaving Westrum, two persons entered this walk, one of whom was Miss Delamere, and the other a stranger, upon whose arm she leant, as, in earnest and engrossing conversation, they moved slowly forward.

There was a singular expression of mingled triumph and apprehension on the brow of Sybil, while the features of her companion wore a restless and anxious look, totally at variance with his

apparent character. He was a tall and finely-formed man of about thirty years of age, with large light-blue eyes, fair hair, arranged after a foreign fashion, a marked and somewhat salient nose, and a beard closely cut, and encircling his chin; a mode now designated *en collier*, but which was, at that period, totally unknown in England. A decided air of fashion, and even of pretension, could be detected through the extreme, but evidently studied simplicity of his dress and bearing; and there was an expression of haughty superciliousness about his mouth, which he found it impossible at intervals to suppress.

"And you are really happy, Sybil?" were the first words he uttered after a pause, during which his eyes had been rivetted upon the fairy-like feet of his companion.

"Certainly."

"I dare not believe it possible."

"And wherefore?"

"Because you once loved me. Deny it not: you loved me."

"Is this intended as an insult, Sir Horace?" asked Miss Delamere, as she suddenly paused, and, withdrawing her hand from his arm, looked proudly in his face.

"Pshaw!" muttered the stranger through his

clenched teeth, at the same time re-possessing himself of the liberated hand, and again leading her forward; "Do you connect the idea of insult with your love? Be more rational, charming Sybil. You are conscious that there is no great pleasure to be derived from dwelling upon the past for either of us; but this slight reference was necessary. You are too clever a tactician, too accomplished a woman of the world, to imagine for a moment that it is simple curiosity which had led me to intrude upon you on this occasion. You cannot think it, and must be well able to solve the riddle. Tell me, then, why am I here?"

"I am no *Cædipus*;" was the cold reply; but the heart of the lady beat tumultuously, and her eye fell as she compelled herself to answer; "You must e'en play the *Sphinx* yourself."

"You will not help me to a solution?"

"I cannot."

"Nay, then, since you are resolved, I know you well enough to feel all the fruitlessness of persisting further—and yet your woman-heart—"

"Has ceased to control my reason;" interposed Miss Delamere; "I have learnt the fallacy of imagination; and am now content to abide by realities."

"But are you quite sure, that you are really doing this? I confess, that to me your whole existence here appears only a graceful fiction. Sybil, you are no common being; but even you may be too adventurous."

"Would you assume the right to control my actions?"

"By no means; I am not so rash. If I found it impossible to do so when I possessed that right, I should scarcely venture to make the attempt now. But I confess, that when I remember the slender amount of the wreck of your father's fortune, and the exact addition which was made to it, I cannot comprehend the splendour by which you are surrounded."

"Miracles may be wrought even in the nineteenth century;" said Miss Delamere quietly.

"So I perceive; but will not the bubble burst?"

"Before I answer your question you are bound to answer mine. What brings you here?"

The gentleman did not immediately reply; but after the pause of an instant, said resolutely:

"A passion which I cannot overcome."

"And yet;" faltered Sybil, evidently panting with emotion; "after what has passed—"

"True; after what has passed, you have a right to be astonished at my presence; and yet,

Sybil, you must feel at once that where you have been loved, you never can be forgotten."

"You are complimentary."

"I am, at least, sincere. You have seen fit to make yourself the centre of a social pageant; nor shall I attempt to fathom your motives. Only this much I may venture to remark—that be your reasons what they may, the farce which you have put upon the stage must soon be played out. Do not persist, therefore, in what may ultimately prove a ruinous error; but let me drop the curtain, while the audience are still dazzled by the effect of your machinery."

"You speak in enigmas. Is your haughty mother cognizant of this new caprice?"

"Call it what you please;" said her companion, as he clasped in his own the small hand that rested on his arm: "I will not cavil with you for words. No, *bella è cara*, my mother knows not that I am here; knows not, in fact, that I am in England; nor will she even be aware that I have left Florence, if you consent to my wishes, so rapidly will we wing our way back."

A singular expression passed over the eloquent features of his listener, as she asked somewhat bitterly; "And your suspicions—How are they to be laid at rest?"

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"I must exert my philosophy;" was the reply, but the tone in which it was uttered implied more uneasiness than pleasantry. "A year hence, Sybil, and from what I see around me, I am quite aware that you must be penniless. You will tell me, perhaps, that the lovely face now so proudly turned towards me, will prevent such a climax; but do not deceive yourself. The fates only know why you have chosen a wilderness like this for so gorgeous a display, or what benefit you expect to derive from it; for here there cannot exist a single being capable of appreciating you; I will not say capable of loving you; for you have placed yourself upon too lofty a pedestal to encourage such advances; and, moreover, I know you to care little for exciting such a feeling."

"And yet I once loved *you*."

Her companion shook his head; "That you deceived yourself for a time into the belief, I will concede;" he said gravely; "but the result proved your mistake. Remember why, and how we parted."

"My necessities compelled me to the concession;" murmured Sybil, as the hot blood burnt upon her cheek.

"Why will you wilfully misunderstand me?" he asked impatiently; "You know well that I

made no allusion which could wound your pride—mine was a mere question of feeling.”

“Be it so;” said Miss Delamere; “And now?”

“Now, I would remind you how devotedly, how earnestly I loved you; and with what reluctance I lent myself to the wishes of my family, even after I discovered that it was in vain to hope that I could ever inspire you with an equally absorbing passion. Yes, Sybil, even then I loved you, although I could no longer shut my eyes to the fact that vanity was with you more powerful than affection; and that—but enough—I am not here to reproach, but to convince you that in my breast, at least, affection was no feint; and that I am still as much your slave as ever.”

“Do not believe it;” said Miss Delamere scornfully; “I have no faith in the constancy of your sex. I should as soon endeavour to write on the wave, or ride upon the wind, as to rely upon the permanence of any passion, however violent. No, no, Sir Horace; you, who were scared by a phantom, when I was unscathed by a single breath, cannot now, in sober earnestness, come to claim the hand which you formerly rejected.”

“I come to reclaim the heart.”

Sybil started. A shiver ran through her

veins ; her pale lips parted, but she could not articulate a syllable.

“ You tremble, Sybil ;” continued her companion ; “ And yet, what can you fear ? Look dispassionately at our mutual position. I am free and wealthy. My presence here to-day must convince you of the extent of my love. You are madly braving a certain and a swift-coming destruction, from which I would fain save you. It were idle to expose the reasons which render it impossible that I should offer you my name ; but my heart, Sybil—that heart which you first taught to feel ; is all your own. Will you reject its homage ?”

“ And this to a woman whom you once sought to make your wife ?”

“ Even so. Do not let us enact a melodrama, Sybil. To the world be what you please. Make of yourself, if you will, the presiding genius of the Aladdin’s garden which you have created about you, and induce those who visit it to believe that every leaf and every blossom is a gem ; but to me be honest. Had I heard of you in a remote retirement, shunning the eyes of the world, and anxious to escape not only the influence, but also the temptations of the past, I should have endeavoured to forget you ; but as, even in my

foreign home, I traced you step by step, fondly lingering in the shadow of my blighted affection, and learnt alike with wonder and incredulity the inexplicable nature of your proceedings, I began to hope that you would not again meet me unmoved; but that——”

“Why do you pause, Sir Horace? You see that I listen calmly.”

“In short, Sybil;” faltered her companion; “I taught myself to believe that, recklessly as you might rush upon your own ruin, you would not willingly involve your mother in the same suffering; but that I should be able to induce you to spurn the comments of a world by which you had already been wounded; and to restore both yourself and her to legitimate affluence.”

The self-command exhibited by Miss Delamere as she listened, was almost frightful. Her lips were ashy pale, and the veins about her temples swollen almost to bursting; but her step was steady, and her head erect. It would have been impossible from her manner to analyse the feeling by which she was possessed.

“Have I deceived myself, Sybil?” pursued the low passionate voice; “Will you not be mine as I have loved to dream? A life of devotion shall repay the sacrifice; you shall not breathe a wish,

you shall not indulge a vision, which I will not hasten to gratify. Speak, dearest; do I plead in vain?"

A strange wild smile flickered upon the lips of Miss Delamere; and, encouraged by her silence, and an expression which he misinterpreted, her companion ventured to throw his arm about her waist. He encountered no resistance; but as he drew her towards him, a bitter and hollow laugh broke from her lips, as, bending her head, she whispered in his ear,—

"Neither ruin nor disgrace await me, Sir Horace Trevor: I am an affianced wife!"

Then, turning upon him a look of haughty defiance, she withdrew herself from his clasp; only, however, to perceive, at the distance of a few paces, Mortimer, evidently overpowered by emotion, standing directly in her path.

For an instant she quailed, but only for an instant; in the next she advanced towards him with a radiant smile and an extended hand, exclaiming blandly;—

"Ha! you are welcome, truant. I was just beginning to weary of my newly-arrived cousin, who is practising all his pretty fascinations upon me on his way to one whom he loves better. And when did you return? Do not venture to tell me

that you have been more than an hour at Westrum, lest I resent so glaring a proof of indifference towards the friends who have been long and anxiously awaiting your re-appearance. And now I must make you known to my relative, Sir Horace Trevor; the admiration of our sex, and the envy of his own. Horace, this is Mr. Mortimer, of whom we were just speaking."

Frederic had instinctively clasped the hand which had been extended to him, but he did not retain it; and as they were successively named, the gentlemen exchanged a cold and haughty bow, which augured unfavourably for their future good understanding.

At a single glance Miss Delamere thoroughly appreciated the inimical feeling with which they met; and, uncertain of the extent of what Mortimer might have seen or heard before she became aware of his presence, she hastened to introduce an irrelevant subject of conversation.

"And thus you are still wedded to Florence, Horace," she said, as if pursuing a former topic; "and fully purpose an immediate return there? In truth, I am by no means astonished at your resolution. You know that with me, also, beautiful Italy has always been a favourite dream."

"Then why not return there?"

Sybil stole a glance at Frederic, who was walking silently by her side, ere she replied with a smile,—

“My movements are not always under the control of my wishes; many things may occur to prevent such an expatriation—at least for the present.”

“What woman wills, fate wills,” said Sir Horace with emphasis; “and especially when that woman is Sybil Delamere.”

“Alas! how well you know to the contrary.”

“Certainly not from my experience of the past. You may have thwarted the projects of others; but I believe that you have in general been tolerably successful in accomplishing your own.”

“*Et tu, Brute!*” exclaimed the lady with a light laugh, which, however, failed to disguise altogether a certain feeling of anxiety and restlessness; “but I ought to have remembered that it is dangerous to tilt against you in a war of wits. Talk, therefore, if you please, of any one rather than of myself, for you will mislead Mr. Mortimer into a belief that I am a very dangerous person; an idea which I am very sure has never yet occurred to him.”

“I congratulate your friend upon the personal qualifications which have enabled him to remain

blind to the fact ;” replied Trevor sarcastically ; “ He must be possessed of an ample fund of talent and amiability, to work such a miracle as that of encountering alone and unrestrictedly the fascinations which turned the heads of half London ; and even then despised the limited extent of their power. You did not know Miss Delamere in town, Mr. Mortimer ; immersed in pleasure, surrounded by adorers, and the very arbitress of fashion ; or you would have feared to approach her here, where you were exposed to the whole artillery of her blandishments. Do not be deluded into the belief that she is to be encountered with impunity. I—her cousin—warn you of your error.”

Sybil bit her lip ; and Mortimer, still too much irritated to trust himself with words, answered only by a slight bend, as Miss Delamere passed her hand through his arm, and leant upon it, as though she clung to him for support.

“ Truly this Grange affair is a strange whim ;” pursued the incorrigible Trevor ; “ I leave you in a crowd ; yourself the busiest mote quivering in the sunbeam, and I find you here built in, like a delinquent nun, between four walls.”

“ I was weary of the turmoil to which you allude.”

"Weary!" echoed her interlocutor; "Not so, fair lady, if I know anything of human nature, and above all, of woman nature. Your sex only weary of the world when it has wearied of them: and all those who look you in the face will feel the impossibility of such an effect in your case."

"You have faith in nothing;" replied Sybil gaily.

"I have heard;" was the retort; "that a stricken deer always flies to the covert to die."

"While I"—interposed Miss Delamere, making a violent effort to control her emotion; "sought the solitude of the country in order really to live; for my previous state of being was mere empty existence. I was like one who had never looked upon a sun-rise; and who knew not the marvellous blessings and the glorious privileges to be obtained by those who really seek them."

"Better and better! You philosophize. I am delighted that I ventured thus to invade your retreat, for I shall leave you a wiser and a happier woman. Thus, then, you have blotted out the past, and now live only in the future?"

"You read me admirably."

"And am I to declare this to poor Captain Fitz—what was his name?—whose head you turned for a whole month; and whose heart was

only saved from destruction by the fact of its having already been regularly broken once or twice every season for the last five years?"

"You may declare it to a whole military phalanx."

"But not to Prince Gustave, surely, Sybil?"

Despite all her self-command, the hand of the lady trembled upon the arm that supported it, and her eyes flashed with irritation; but the expression of triumph which she read upon the features of Trevor made her rally in a moment: and it was with an affectation of interest which betrayed her inward emotion that she exclaimed,—

"Ha! Apropos of the poor young Prince—where is he now parading his listlessness? I have not heard of him since I left town."

"We have been residing together in Florence."

"Together!" echoed Sybil with a start, and evidently for once thrown off her guard.

"*E perchè non, la mia bella?*" asked Sir Horace; "Did you not yourself encourage our acquaintance? And could you believe me to be formed of so coarse a clay as to be unable to appreciate the delicate porcelain of your exquisite friend?"

Mortimer listened in silence, but Miss Delamere could feel the violent throbbing of his heart as she walked beside him. Fortunately he had

not been required to join in a conversation which turned upon persons with whom he was unacquainted ; but this exemption had only enabled him the more fully to note every word which had been uttered by either party ; and the longer he listened, the more painfully he felt in how false a position he stood as regarded the past life of the woman to whom he was about to unite his fate. Moreover, the manner of Sir Horace towards Sybil displeased him. It is true, he was her cousin ; but even that relationship, close as it was, did not appear to Frederic to justify the supercilious and almost accusing tone in which he sometimes addressed her. There was a levity, also, in his allusions, which implied a want of respect for her dignity, if not actually for her feelings. Either she had loved these men who were now so lightly mentioned ; or she had trifled with them, and thus given him a licence to couple her name with theirs ; and in either case, how was his idol fallen ?

He thought of his buried mother, and sighed.

His companions still talked on, but he listened no longer. His whole soul was in the past—that past which was to him a mystery and a blank. Could it be that Sybil, whom he had believed to be above the weaknesses and the errors of her

sex, had frittered away her youth in those heartless and puerile affectations of attachment, which merely gratify the vanity without awakening the feelings; but which, nevertheless, wear the bloom of purity from the spirit, and harden it into worldliness, while rendering it for ever afterwards incapable of a deep and honest passion? Or had she, indeed, loved so absorbingly, that her heart had become a waste; and that those who knew her best were conscious that they could not pain her by allusions from which others of her sex would instinctively have shrunk? Vainly did he ask himself these questions. They could be answered only by a knowledge of the past.

One thing was evident. Sybil had been one of the gayest votaries of fashion—courted, admired, and adulated; and she had suddenly withdrawn herself from the world, and buried herself in the country, where she was an utter stranger. What could have induced such a resolution? It could not have been any dimunition of homage, for she was still young, beautiful, and brilliant: while it was equally apparent that the sacrifice had not been made from prudential motives; as she had, on her arrival at The Grange, at once entered upon a course of almost reckless expenditure, which implied no pecuniary anxieties. Hitherto, Mortimer

had never speculated upon the subject. It had been Sybil's pleasure to act thus; and he was grateful for any caprice which had brought them together; but now a doubt of he knew not what crept over him; and the words of his mother rose before him in characters of fire. A thousand confused ideas and vague misgivings floated across his brain. He felt as though his affection had been wronged and trifled with; that Sybil was not what he had believed her to be; and as he moved forward, instinctively obeying the impulse of the beautiful hand which still rested upon his arm, he was conscious of an irritation which he struggled to conceal.

Ere long, however, Miss Delamere was struck by the altered expression of his countenance; and apprehensive that the conversation of her new guest had impressed him to her disadvantage, she hastened, with her usual tact, to turn it upon himself, well aware that the mention of his own name could not fail to arouse him from his untimely reverie; and judging, by its effect upon his physiognomy, that she must at once adopt a bold measure in order to counteract its influence, and retain her hold upon his honour.

"Yes!" she said, in reply to some observation of her more loquacious companion; "Therein, at

least, you are quite right; and Mr. Mortimer himself is a breathing evidence of the truth of your remark."

Frederic started as he heard himself named, and once more he listened with attention

"How so?" asked Sir Horace, listlessly. "Are the gay deceivers of our sex to be found upon every soil? Surely here, at least, you should have escaped."

"And yet I have done the very reverse;" said Miss Delamere, in a tone of light gaiety which grated unpleasantly upon the ear of her lover; "I buried myself, as you see, in order to live entirely for my own fancies and feelings; but my star had willed it otherwise; and I only rushed upon my fate."

"And am I to imply that Mr. Mortimer is that fate?"

"I must even permit you to do so; but, believe me, that fault has not been my own. You would not imagine, Horace, to look at him, calm and placid as he appears, that he has far more strength of character than yourself; and yet so it is. When I arrived at Westrum, I not only made his acquaintance, but also that of his betrothed wife—a cousin, born and educated for the express purpose of rendering him the happiest man on earth.—By

the way, how is it that you men never will be content to be happy save after your own fashion?—You can imagine nothing prettier, or more gentle, or more guileless, than the fair betrothed; and yet he has seen fit to overthrow all the family arrangements; and to lay his heart upon a less worthy altar.”

“You are modest, my sweet kinswoman. But how did you accomplish this transition?”

“Have I not already told you that the fault was not my own? In vain did I represent to him the imprudence of thwarting his mother’s wishes. In vain did I counsel, argue, and even frown; all was of no avail. He was still rash enough to persist. Were you not, Frederic?” and she turned towards him with a smile for which, only on the previous day, he would have forfeited a year of existence.

Now, however, even that smile could not overcome the feeling produced by the indelicacy of such a communication, made in such a tone. Shocked by her levity, Mortimer could only stammer out a few disjointed words; but, affecting to understand from these that he assented to her assertion, she continued without any change of manner,—

“Thus, then, you see that I must stand acquitted; although, in endeavouring to restore him to his reason, I contrived to lose my own: and

now you will probably be better able to understand why I have ceased to regret town and its gaieties. For pleasure I mean to exchange happiness, and to substitute affection for admiration."

"Mr. Mortimer little suspects how many enemies he will have succeeded in making. Like the brothers who peopled earth by flinging stones behind them, he will soon discover that he has created a shoal of envious adversaries, who will never forgive so heinous an act of piracy as that of carrying off the brilliant and coveted Miss Delamere."

"You speak emphatically, Sir Horace;" said Mortimer with a clouded brow.

"And I have cause to do so;" replied Trevor, composedly; "You have disarranged all my own plans also. My errand here was to induce my fair cousin to return with me to Florence; and you have most inauspiciously crossed my path. For I should have succeeded, Sybil, should I not?" —he asked, with an expression of eye and lip which flooded her brow with crimson—"if you had not given Mr. Mortimer a right to hold you back?"

"In any, and every case, your failure would have been signal;" said Miss Delamere, with a haughtiness which she had not previously displayed towards him; then, as if fearful that she risked

too much, she added carelessly : “ My mother, as you are aware, detests the water ; and is not young enough to make a perpetual pilgrimage of her existence. We were about to leave Westrum for the continent a short time back, but my wishes were overruled.”

And again she looked earnestly and affectionately in the face of Mortimer, as if to recall to his memory by whom and how they had been contravened.

Still, alike pained, displeased, and disappointed, Frederic could only reply by a constrained smile. Willingly would he have found himself alone, for the pulses of his forehead laboured almost to pain, and he felt quite unequal to the effort of taking part in a conversation which jarred upon the sensitiveness of his nature ; but he could not endure the idea of leaving Sybil to the society of her cousin, who had already become odious to him. By his officious appearance he had torn away the veil which never should have been raised ; and had revealed to him the woman whom he loved divested of half the spell by which she had hitherto been environed. He was conscious, too, that he had exhibited himself most disadvantageously to this supercilious stranger ; who not only possessed the privilege of a relationship which authorized him

to become a guest at The Grange, but who was also cognisant of the past—that past which he now felt must influence all his future life—that past of which he had until to-day been careless; but which now, phantom-like, scared him as he glanced towards it

Reluctant as he was, however, he felt that the effort must be made. He must return to his desolate home—now doubly desolate, for Gertrude was no longer there to welcome him with her meek smile, and her low soft voice—and he must learn to endure the conviction that, while he sat in solitude, brooding over his doubts and apprehensions, his brilliant mistress was bandying sallies and sarcasms with one who had known her from her childhood, and who was evidently in her entire confidence.

Feigning, therefore, suddenly to remember an enforced appointment, he drew out his watch, and, declaring that he had already exceeded the given time, he hurriedly took his leave; but not before Sybil had tenderly murmured in his ear: “Farewell, then, till to-morrow, my own Frederick! Remember how earnestly I shall wait and watch for you.”

CHAPTER II.

AND his home was indeed desolate when he once more entered it. His dinner was served in silence, and removed untouched; and then he was once more alone. Nothing could exceed the feeling of dreariness with which he listened to the sound of his own footsteps, as he paced to and fro in the echoing apartment which had once been glad with fond and cheerful voices; or the loud ticking of the time-piece, which only served to show him how wearily the moments passed along.

Fatigued at length by the monotony of his own movements, he threw himself upon a chair, and abandoned himself to a train of bitter and upbraiding reflections. He could no longer doubt that he had been deceived: that, deluded by his vanity, and misled by a headstrong passion, he had become the easy prey of a heartless and manœuvring woman. The pang was a bitter one; and as he remembered the pure and unselfish affection which he had recklessly flung from him, he bowed his head upon his breast, and

a tear stole into his eye. For an instant he resolved never to see Sybil again; she was not yet his wife; and he would leave her free to exert her arts upon another victim; but this resolution failed as suddenly as it had been conceived: he might indeed liberate Sybil, but he could not free himself from the spell which she had cast about him. Even now, even at the moment when he mentally acknowledged her probable unworthiness, he was rather inclined to curse the intrusive cousin who had opened his eyes to her demerits, than her in whom they existed. For weal or for woe he felt, indeed, as she herself had expressed it, that Miss Delamere was his fate.

It was too late to contend; his honour was engaged, and she held his happiness in her hands. And then came the soothing memory that she had owned to him a previous affection, so sincere as to have threatened in its failure the very principle of her existence; but still, as she had declared, less deep than that which he had himself inspired. And who should say but that her love for him might obliterate every other passing fancy, and restore her to him, as he had once fondly believed, all his own.

Thus vacillating between his pride and his

passion, did Mortimer alternately vow to escape by flight the snare which had been laid for him ; and then resolve immediately afterwards to maintain his right over the affections which he had won.

“ When once she is really mine ;” he murmured to himself ; “ she shall at least renounce all intercourse with this sarcastic cousin, who has suddenly come between us like a blight ; and meanwhile, I will watch her narrowly ; not a word, not a gesture, shall escape me which bears reference to the past. In order to comprehend my position fully—even although by so doing I should but be meeting regret and disappointment on the very threshold of my married life—I will garner up every inference and every allusion : and thus, day by day, and hour by hour, I shall learn something of her past existence —something which may tend to acquit her in my eyes, or which must render me supremely wretched.”

In vain did a passing memory bring back his thoughts to Gertrude : her image dwelt with him only as that of a loved sister and a regretted friend : no pulse bounded as he recalled the sweet companionship of past days ; Sybil was to him all in all ; and even while his reason doubted, and his pride rebelled, the vehemence of his passion continued unabated.

Nevertheless, he resolved on the following day to abstain from visiting The Grange. He had a plausible excuse in the accession of business, which had supervened on the death of his mother; and even amid his anxiety to watch the proceedings of Sybil, he could not overcome his dislike of her cousin.

Accordingly he ordered his horse, and rode leisurely through the green lanes, and over the hills of the neighbourhood, suffering the animal to travel at his own pace, and almost to follow his own path; nor was it until upon entering the town on his return that he was aroused from the painful and irritating train of thought, in which he had indulged throughout the ride; but then, indeed, he awoke once more to the realities of the present, as he encountered Miss Delamere and her guest, seated side by side in the little pony phaeton, which the lady was driving with her accustomed ease and skill.

The meeting was constrained on all sides; for the annoyance, even if not the jealousy of Mortimer was at once renewed; while Miss Delamere herself for an instant appeared embarrassed. Nevertheless, with that tact which seldom deserts her sex in any extremity, she was the first to rally; and playfully menacing him with her whip, she exclaimed with a sunny smile, so soon as the neces-

sary greetings were exchanged; "You dare not reproach me, Frederic, for having played the truant, for you must remember that I told you I should expect you at an early, a very early hour this morning; and accordingly I awaited your appearance until I felt that it was vain to expect you any longer; and therefore I yielded to the entreaties of Sir Horace, who was anxious to see somewhat of the *ultima thule* to which he had so courageously ventured; and resolved to do the honours of our hills and lanes; not, however, without a hope, which is now realised, that we might encounter you upon our way."

"Did I produce the impression of one who intended to intrude a reproach?" asked Mortimer rather coldly.

Sybil looked uneasy.

"You see that my fair cousin is at least prepared to wear her chains meekly, Mr. Mortimer," observed Trevor in his accustomed accent.

"Miss Delamere is too good;" was the stiff reply; "but, as yet, I have no right to inflict them."

A sob, almost of suffocation, rose to the throat of the lady, of which the bitterness was not diminished as she detected the low but self-gratulatory laugh which escaped her companion.

“And what think you of our Siberia, Sir Horace Trevor?” pursued Mortimer in the same cold tone; “Can you breathe amid these primitive wastes, where the perfumes of fashion have never come? Can you contrive to exist in this wilderness where men dare to vegetate without a previous patent of exclusiveness and *ton*? Or, have you seen enough to induce you to retreat in alarm to a more congenial hemisphere?”

“I like Westrum and its environs vastly;” said the baronet with a yawn; “I always had a passion for discoveries; and I begin to hope that I have in reality more rural tastes than I hitherto gave myself credit for possessing. As to living here, I say nothing; but every one condemned to such a fate may at least congratulate himself upon the fact of emulating Truth, which, as some one has somewhere told us, has taken up its residence at the bottom of a well.”

“Are you aware that all my property is situated in this county, Sir Horace?” asked Mortimer haughtily.

“Yes, oh, yes; so I understand from my cousin. Sybil has no secrets from me, you know.”

“I was not aware;” retorted Frederic with increasing displeasure; “that Miss Delamere herself was so well informed upon the subject.”

"My *dear* Frederic;" said the young lady, coughing down a sensation of no pleasant description, as she saw her prudent inquiries thus betrayed; "surely you do not intend to make me understand that you so readily forget your own communications to me? Sir Horace, with the natural anxiety of a relative, asked questions which I answered without reserve; not supposing that you wished to make any mystery of so common-place a circumstance."

Mortimer felt embarrassed in his turn; he had no recollection of having made his pecuniary affairs a subject of conversation during his interviews with Sybil; but he was unable to deny that such had been the case, and he consequently remained silent.

"You will dine at The Grange—of course?" said Miss Delamere earnestly.

"I fear—I believe—I think that it will be impossible;" was the reply. "I have to make arrangements for the payment of Gertrude's legacy, which have already been too long delayed. She is my *cousin*, as you are aware;" he added, with a peculiar emphasis; "and no merely personal consideration should suffice to induce me to neglect her interests. Her signature to certain papers is indispensable; and in order to obtain

this, it is necessary that I should see her. I had intended to ride to The Grange this evening to take leave for a few days; but as we have so fortunately met, I will do so now."

"Are you serious, Frederic?" asked Sybil with a throbbing heart.

"Perfectly so; and no moment could be more auspicious than the present (when I know you to be assured of pleasant and congenial society) for the performance of my duty. Make, therefore, I pray you, my excuses to Mrs. Delamere, whom I hope to find in stronger health when I return."

"And you really will not dine at The Grange?"

"I cannot. My conscience already reproaches me."

"And when may we look for you again?"

"I can scarcely answer the question. I am about to travel from one *ultima thule* to another; and I know not what may occur to detain me. I need not, however, on that account detain *you*." And pressing the hand which Sybil extended to him with a reproachful smile, he slightly touched his hat to the baronet, by whom the salutation was returned with equal coldness; and they separated.

"Sybil!" exclaimed Sir Horace with a light laugh; "I fear that the twig is not so well limed

as you believed. The young Squire is less plastic than he should be in such able hands as yours."

"You do not understand Mortimer;" said his companion, vainly endeavouring to conceal her mortification; "he is annoyed that I should have left home when I promised to wait for him; and he wishes me to perceive his annoyance."

"Is that all?"

"What more *can* there be?"

"Nay, you know best; but it struck me—It is too absurd, fair *cousin*, I admit, considering our impromptu relationship; got up, too, as it was, for his especial delectation—but it struck me that the gentle Corydon was jealous."

"Nonsense!"

"Do you dare me, Sybil?"

"Trevor, you are absurd."

"Perhaps so; but remember that my absurdity has brought me from Italy, and that I owe no forbearance to this tetchy swain of yours. So long as I believed you to be sure of him, I compelled myself to submit, aware as I am that he had certain social conventionalities in his favour; but having within the last half hour seen reason to change my opinion, I warn you that I enter the lists again."

“Do you persist in your insult, Sir Horace?”

“You give my humble suit a harsh name, fair lady! Do you hold it as nothing that I have found it impossible to forget you?—that in order to secure your love I am ready to expatriate myself for months, or even years?—that although my whole family will be estranged from me by such a measure, I am here to implore of you to assert your superiority to vulgar prejudice, and to share my fortunes?”

“Do not deceive yourself while you fail to deceive me, Sir Horace;” said Miss Delamere with an angry and impatient gesture. “I could in no manner so greatly gratify your suspicious and arrogant relatives as by disgracing myself as you suggest; for those who could not brook Sybil Delamere as your wife would rejoice to exult over her as your mistress. You see that, unlike yourself, I have courage enough to call things by their right names. And now hear me while I declare to you that had another individual on earth dared to insult me by such a proposition, I would have resented it to the latest hour of my life; but with you, Sir Horace Trevor, I am peculiarly situated; and I have felt myself compelled to endure the affront. Let it, however, suffice to assure you, once for all, that nothing less than your hand and

name will ever induce me to listen to you for a moment!"

"Again, Sybil?"

"As you please;" was the scornful retort; "Remember that it was not I who solicited a renewal of our intercourse."

"But should this worthy country squire fail you?"

"You have heard all that I have to say upon the subject. But of this be convinced, that Mortimer will no more fail me than I shall fail myself. It may please you in your exclusiveness to despise him; but he is a man of honour, and will scorn to falsify his words."

"Honour!" sneered Trevor; "It is a term which admits of such various significations that it becomes difficult to define it accurately. We all pique ourselves upon our honour, even when others conceive it to have been altogether forfeited."

The eyes of Miss Delamere flashed, but she made no rejoinder.

"You will be a coquette to the last, Sybil;" pursued the baronet after a pause; "but one can scarcely look you in the face, and not forgive you; although, knowing your power as you do, you might be more merciful in its exercise. But what of this cousin mentioned by your Pyramus?"

Is it the pretty orphan to whom his mamma had promised him as a husband? If so, *gare le loup !*"

Miss Delamere curled her lip in scorn : " Yes, the legacy to which he alluded was one bequeathed by his mother to her *protégée* ; but I am perfectly tranquil on the subject. When the eagle has once gazed upon the sun, he is content to close his eyes to the moonlight."

" A pretty metaphor enough ; but do not forget that even the eagle cannot gaze for ever without wearying of a splendour so blinding. Poetry has its charms for a while, but the veriest enthusiast must at times descend to prose. Even I am occasionally prosaic."

Sybil endeavoured to assume an air of gaiety and unconcern ; but she was nevertheless not without some misgiving on the subject of Mortimer's visit to his cousin. It was evidently a resolution as suddenly formed as it had been abruptly announced ; and she felt that they had parted coldly and unsatisfactorily. That the presence of Sir Horace Trevor, and his unguarded allusions, had tended to render Frederic uneasy and suspicious, she could not conceal even from herself ; and sincere was her secret gratulation that she had, by boldly avowing their engagement to a third party, made

it impossible for him honourably to recede without some defined and tangible cause.

Still she dreaded the power of old associations and habits over the nature of one so impressionable as Mortimer, at a moment when he was writhing under imagined slight; and she had no sooner reached home than she retired to her own room, in order to reflect upon the measures to be pursued to prevent, or at least to delay, the threatened departure.

Meanwhile, Sir Horace Trevor strolled to the library, half mortified, and half amused by the dialogue in which he had just been engaged; and to his surprise found Mrs. Delamere installed in an easy chair, in an apartment which she generally shunned.

“Do I disturb your studies, my dear madam?” he asked as he entered.

“Oh no, I was only thinking, and I would rather not think;” was the tremulously uttered reply; “But where is Sybil?”

“In her own room, I believe. She complained of being somewhat fatigued.”

“And where is Mr. Mortimer? I am always uneasy when I do not see Mr. Mortimer here.”

“Mr. Mortimer has just taken leave of Miss Delamere. He leaves Westrum tomorrow on a visit to his cousin.”

Mrs. Delamere raised her head by a sudden impulse, and fixed her eyes steadfastly upon the speaker.

"Gone to see his cousin!" she murmured as if unconsciously; "Only returned yesterday, and leaves again tomorrow!" then, as she glanced rapidly round her with a slight shudder, she pursued, more directly addressing her companion; "Is this your work, Sir Horace Trevor?"

"On my soul, no. Why should you suspect it?" was the reply.

"I do not know—I cannot explain;" she said languidly, as she once more fell back into a recumbent position; "but I am becoming more bewildered every hour. However, Sybil knows best. Yet why, or for what you are here, Sir Horace, I cannot comprehend. You have now no claim upon Sybil?"

"I do not seek to advance any;" replied the Baronet with quiet sarcasm; "I came to The Grange simply to pay my respects both to yourself and her."

"It is very extraordinary;" faltered the old lady. "Does Mr. Mortimer approve your visit?"

"I did not hazard the inquiry;" said Trevor, taking up a book at random, and throwing himself into a chair; "but, judging from the expression of his countenance, I should feel inclined to doubt it."

“ Then why do you remain ? Why does Sybil allow it ? ”

“ She has adopted me as a cousin.”

“ Sir Horace Trevor ; ” said the agitated mother ; “ do not jest upon such a subject. You know that I am helpless in all that concerns Sybil ; but you cannot, you *dare* not, seek to renew your addresses to her. You dare not, for you are a man of the world, and you dread its sneer. Why, then, would you ruin her prospects ?—Why would you destroy us both ? ”

“ Believe me, my dear madam ; ” exclaimed the Baronet, touched in spite of his egotism by the tears which were falling slowly over her pale cheeks ; “ that I am far from having any such intention ; and surely when you look upon the luxury by which you are surrounded, you must admit that the idea of ruin comes strangely from your lips.”

Mrs. Delamere clasped her hands convulsively together, but after a moment she conquered her emotion sufficiently to reply with a forced composure, which was almost impressive,—

“ I could have understood the remark from any one but yourself, and have admitted its truth, Sir Horace ; but from you it bears a strange and painful construction ; from you who know so well—Let it pass, however. You have, perhaps, earned the right to wound me——”

“ My dear madam, I swear to you——”

“ Let it pass, Sir Horace ; let it pass. But, once more ; why are you here ?—why did Sybil consent to receive you ? You are not, you cannot be, anything to each other ; and, remember, that should your visit excite the displeasure of Mr. Mortimer, your revenge will be a cruel one.”

The idea which her own words had conjured up, and the unaccustomed energy which she had exhibited, had by this time fairly overpowered the unhappy old lady ; who, burying her face in her handkerchief, as if to shut out even the sight of her companion, sobbed aloud. Trevor rose, and paced uneasily up and down the room. He had always been used to see Mrs. Delamere so placid, and so apparently reckless of all that passed about her, that he was totally unprepared for this sudden burst of feeling ; nor was it until she had regained some degree of composure, that he ventured to approach and take her hand.

“ Speak your wishes, my dear madam ;” he said, in an accent of deference which seemed strange in such a speaker ; “ and, be they what they may, I will obey them.”

Mrs. Delamere looked up with a smile of gratitude too intense to be mistaken. “ I thank you ;” she murmured between her sobs ; “ with

my whole heart I thank you. Sybil is, I fear, playing a desperate game ; and her fate is in your hands. Leave us now, at once, if you would save her—leave us, and forget us.”

“I will order my horses within an hour.”

“Horace, how I once loved you ;” faltered the feeble voice ; “Oh, why were you not my son ?”

“Farewell, my dear madam, for ever ;” said Trevor, as he wrung her hand respectfully ; “I will but take leave of Miss Delamere, and depart at once.”

“Do not even that ;” implored the old lady as she detained him for an instant. “I will explain it all to Sybil. It is better that you should not meet again.”

“Be it so—I came hither because I was a coxcomb, and presumed upon the past. Your tears have rebuked me ; and not through my means shall you shed another. Tell her that I sincerely desire her happiness ; and bid her at the same time beware. To her, the past should act as a powerful monitor, as it has done to me. Farewell ; but never cease to remember that I have expiated my present error by my obedience.”

Mrs. Delamere would have replied, but before she had wiped away her tears he was gone.

CHAPTER III.

AND Mortimer had also proceeded homeward, after parting from Sybil, but it was with a heavy heart and depressed energies. His indignation at her levity and carelessness of wounding his feelings, had endued him with a factitious strength during their interview, and urged him to the sudden resolve he had announced; but he was no sooner alone than he repented his precipitancy, for he at once became conscious how entirely his happiness depended upon her, and how utterly he was in her power.

It was, however, too late to retract his words; and now, in order to sustain an appearance of consistency, he felt that he must carry out his project, and thus leave her for days to the undisturbed society of her cousin—of the man whom, of all others, he hated, without being enabled to advance a plausible reason for his dislike. The aversion was, nevertheless, as strong as it was intuitive; nor did Mortimer seek to counteract the feeling. It sufficed that Trevor admired Sybil, and that he

was in her confidence, to make him obnoxious to his jealous and exacting nature.

Moreover, the sarcastic allusions and biting jests of the baronet had aroused at once the indignation and the suspicions of Frederic; they had cast a baneful cloud over the hitherto bright hemisphere of his passion. Its pure glow was sullied; its fond romance was dispelled; he had seen the cherished idol of his heart treated as a mere woman, and he felt himself aggrieved.

By what right had this presumptuous stranger intruded himself and his memories of the past between him and his betrothed wife? Upon what pretence did he presume to censure and to judge one who was plighted to another? And then came the recollection that Sybil had herself justified such interference, by openly and unseasonably communicating to him an engagement in which he could have no concern, and probably felt little interest; and this reminiscence was even more painful than those by which it had been preceded.

Fain would he have acquitted her of every blame, in order that all his irritation might vent itself upon her cousin; but, even blinded as he was by a hitherto uncalculating passion, he could not reconcile the scene in the garden, and her subsequent disclosure, with that nice conception

of the delicacy of her sex which he had loved to indulge.

True, Sybil was no common character, and she had warned him of the fact long ere he had told her that she was dear to him; he should therefore have been prepared for any exhibition of moral daring; but his feelings had been involved in the demonstration, and it had startled him unpleasantly. It was not that he shrank from acknowledging their engagement; he would rather have gloried in declaring it before the face of the whole world; but thus lightly and unhesitatingly revealed by herself, it seemed robbed of half its sanctity.

Suddenly a servant entered the apartment, and placed a letter before him. He glanced listlessly at the address; and then, with an eager gesture, tore it open. He had at once recognised the handwriting of Sybil.

“We cannot part thus”—these were its contents—“I must see you before you go, were it only to hear from your lips what I have already read upon your countenance. I do not seek to upbraid, or to reproach you—you have, perhaps, mistaken both yourself and me; and I desire only to learn the extent of that mistake. I love you too well to murmur; and I forgive you if you can forgive yourself. Sir Horace has gone: in my

present state of mind I could not tolerate society. You only leave Westrum to-morrow ; there is yet time for you to devote one half-hour to the unhappy

“ SYBIL.”

Mortimer sprang to the bell ; ordered his horse ; and in ten minutes was on his way to The Grange.

Sybil loved him—she was unhappy—and Trevor was gone ! All his suspicions were at an end ; they had been dispelled like Alpine mists before the morning sun.

And so time passed on ; and Frederic, who had vowed to himself that, ere long, he would possess every secret of Sybil's heart, spent hours and days at her side, careless and forgetful of all save the present. Even the memory of Sir Horace Trevor had almost ceased to be distasteful to him, from the cold and indifferent manner in which he was constantly mentioned by Miss Delamere ; nay, he began to accuse himself of absolute folly and injustice, to the fascinating creature whose every feeling and anxiety were evidently bound up in himself ; and to marvel at the weakness he had betrayed.

Had Sybil loved her cousin, he would have won her, doubtless, years before ; for that he, or any man, could fail to return her affection, appeared to

Mortimer impossible. Yet, nevertheless, and incongruous as the fact may seem, he clung to his present mode of existence without one effort to enhance his happiness by at once making Sybil his wife.

Had the alternative been forced upon him, he would rather have resigned his life than the prospect of obtaining her hand, for without her he would have felt that life to be a blank; but still, as the diver, who, however sure of his skill, hesitates for awhile ere he takes his venturous leap, so did Mortimer linger in the midst of present security, as though unwilling to lose the firm footing which he still retained.

Thus, weeks and months sped on; and if a shadow occasionally fell upon the bright brow of the lady, it was soon chased by smiles. All her tastes, all her avocations, were made subservient to his wishes. She was at once his friend, his counsellor, and his idol.

Their solitude was almost uninvaded; for although the gentry of the neighbourhood were ready to admit the fascinations and accomplishments of Miss Delamere, they were not the less jealous of her attractions, and suspicious of the mystery by which she was surrounded; while those among them who had been the familiar

friends of Mrs. Mortimer, could not see without regret, and even blame, the effect of her blandishments upon the destined husband of their banished favourite.

The constant visits of Frederic at The Grange, were subject of continual comment; and his consequent estrangement from themselves kept alive a feeling of distaste towards its inhabitants, which sufficed to render their visits brief and unfrequent.

Thus, then, nothing intervened to ruffle the smooth current upon which the lovers glided along the stream of time; and this circumstances was favourable to Sybil, inasmuch as it afforded her ample opportunity to pour out all the stores of her well-cultivated mind and brilliant fancy; and each night, as he rode slowly homeward, dazzled, and more enthralled than ever, Frederic marvelled how so bright and gifted a being could be content to pass her days in an obscure retirement; and to lavish upon him alone all the treasures of her intellect, and all the fascinations of her beauty.

What was the world to him with such a companion? Henceforth Westrum would be his world; he should care for no other, and he should live and die beneath the roof of his ancestors, without one hope or one ambition unsatisfied.

Thus had he quitted Sybil on one occasion,

after an evening of calm and rational enjoyment; enhanced by the exertions which she had made to "hold his reason prisoner." They had sang together all his favourite melodies; they had sat together over the same chess-board, more engrossed by each other than by the game; and while Mrs. Delamere slumbered, or seemed to slumber, in her chair, they had built up a thousand airy castles, each more soft and sunny than the last.

They had talked of the future fondly and eagerly; and Frederic had bespoken her interest and sympathy for his poorer tenantry, and her assistance in a score of projects, all tending to render the home in which their lives were to be spent more worthy of her presence; and as he did so the eye of Sybil sparkled, and her chest heaved; while at intervals her parted lips, and earnest attitude, bespoke a momentary anticipation of what must follow.

The chain woven by her lover was bright, but the connecting link was, nevertheless, wanting; he said nothing which could convert that future into the more immediate present; and thus she waited and watched in vain; and they parted, even as they had done on every previous occasion, without one word from Frederic which implied a wish to realise his visions by their early union.

Still, it was not until he was really gone, that Miss Delamere could believe in such a result. Never had he been more tender or more expansive. What could it mean? Bound to her, as he now was, by every tie of honour, by every bond of principle, could he be merely trifling with her feelings? She still stood in the centre of the apartment, where his hand had clasped hers, and whence she had met and answered the last long look that he turned upon her as he retired. Her cheek was flushed, and her eye glittered; she knew not what to think. The death of Mrs. Mortimer had removed the only avowed obstacle to their marriage; the departure of Gertrude rendered all dread of future rivalry impossible; he was alone, quite alone, in a silent and cheerless home; he made no attempt to disguise the extent of his attachment to herself, while she was conscious that she had left no means untried to rivet the chains which he had voluntarily adopted; and still he appeared to live on as though the present sufficed to satisfy all the exactions of his heart.

And she had borne this strange and almost humiliating uncertainty for months, believing each day that the morrow would terminate her suspense; and that morrow had come and gone, and brought no explanation. What could it mean?

Suddenly the bloom faded from her cheek, and the light from her eye. Could he have learnt the history of the past? Her limbs tottered, and she sank upon a seat. With the rapidity of lightning her thoughts glanced back to the visit of Trevor—Had he, indeed, betrayed her? But, no; that was impossible; for never once had she left them alone together; while the feeling of avoidance which each had exhibited towards the other was also a guarantee that such could not have been the case.

Then she remembered that Mortimer had, during the removal of Gertrude, been absent for many days in town—Who had he met there? With whom had he held communication? Could he have encountered any of her former friends, and questioned them as to her past history? And, if so, what was the meaning of his subsequent conduct? Did he dare—did he consider himself authorized to sport with her feelings, with her fate, with her very existence?

The doubt was almost too terrible to bear; and as she sat in silence, with her hands tightly clasped together, the large drops of emotion started on her brow, and her breath laboured until it escaped audibly from between her clenched teeth.

The brilliant beauty was crushed and bowed ; and in that moment Gertrude was revenged.

Gradually, however, she became more calm ; the improbability that Mortimer, who was almost a stranger in London, should in so short a space of time have gained admission to a circle which prided itself upon its exclusiveness ; and the still greater improbability that he should have attained to a sufficient degree of intimacy with any of its members to enable him to prosecute such an inquiry, forced themselves upon her reason ; but still she could find no plausible solution to his mysterious silence ; and a thousand harrowing apprehensions haunted her mind. Every day, and every hour of suspense, heightened alike her alarm and her difficulty. She reflected with terror that her youth was gone ; and that, did she now fail in effecting the object for which she had striven so zealously, the failure might be fatal. She could not hope long to retain the bloom which characterized her beauty ; and her position was desperate ! Mortimer alone could save her ; for ruin was approaching with giant strides, and she had no other resource.

“Something must be done ;” she at length gasped out, unconscious of her own utterance ; “I must know all—all that is before me. I

cannot endure this gnawing suspense, and live. He must speak, and speak clearly. But how compel him to this? He is weak and suspicious, and startles at a shadow—and yet, he must speak out. Either he is in my power, and I am safe; or he has played me false, and all is over. Trevor cannot have betrayed me—he can know nothing—or, should it be otherwise——” her voice died away in a hoarse whisper, and once more all was silence.

Suddenly a thought flashed across her, and a withering smile rose to her lip as she approached a writing-table, and seated herself before it. For a few moments she remained buried in thought; and then, slowly and earnestly, she began to write. It was evident that the task which she had undertaken was no light or easy one, for she progressed in it slowly, and appeared to form, not only every word, but even every letter, with consummate care and study. But, at length, it was completed; and, after having attentively examined the contents of the paper, she folded it with equal deliberation; and then, having selected a particular seal from a number which lay upon her desk, she closed the letter, and threw the seal that had secured it into the fire, which was still mouldering in the grate.

This done, she remained for a while silently gazing upon the decaying embers, as if jealous lest they should fail in their work of destruction ; but she no sooner saw the glittering ore melt and disappear, than she returned to the table, took up the letter, and, having concealed it in her bosom, calmly, and with renewed self-possession, rang for her maid, and retired to her own apartment.

On the following day Sybil was invisible even to Mortimer. Indisposition confined her to her chamber ; and, after lingering for a couple of hours about the grounds, and sauntering to and fro beneath her windows, in the vain hope of obtaining at least a glance of her figure as she traversed the apartment, he was compelled to return home ungratified. Nor, even then, could he compel himself to any occupation. A whole day without Sybil overcame his philosophy.

Nothing sufficed either to interest or amuse him. He felt no apprehension as to the result of her illness, for Mrs. Delamere had treated the matter lightly, declaring that it was only a head-ache ; and that Sybil was subject to head-aches when she over-exerted herself, which she had done lately, and she had warned her of the consequences. However, Sybil knew best ; and in all probability would be quite well again on the morrow. Thus,

there was no cause for anxiety; and Mortimer was at liberty to bewail his own dreariness; to feel the wretchedness of his large and echoing rooms; and to comprehend his utter dependence upon another. The sensation was by no means a pleasant one. He had become so habituated to the constant society and companionship of Miss Delamere, that he almost felt injured by its sudden withdrawal. She might, so he argued, surely have received him; but then the reflection crossed his mind, that she had declined the visit of her mother, and that he could advance no claim to an indulgence which had been denied to her parent. Still he was only half-reconciled to his exclusion; time hung heavily upon his hands; and he began to feel a conviction that some definite step must be taken to prevent the recurrence of such a mortification. And what step? There was but one which could invest him with a right to dispute the will, and to monopolize the society of Sybil; and to this he had long looked forward as to a fixed and certain event. Why, then, did he hesitate, and fall into a somewhat gloomy reverie, as the vision of an early marriage with his beautiful betrothed fastened itself upon his mind? Was she not to him all that she had ever been; or changed only by an increase of

tenderness? Did he doubt her? No, no; that could not be; and yet, it was nevertheless certain that a cloud still hung over his thoughts. Sybil had indeed given him her heart, her time, and her interest; but he had failed to gain her confidence.

While he had frankly placed before her, not only every action, but almost every feeling, of his life, even from his earliest boyhood; and, as the Orientals express it, had "laid his heart in her hand," she had betrayed no answering trust. She had gladdened him by her gaiety, soothed him by her sympathy, and delighted him by her devotion; but, beyond this, to him she was still morally unknown; and as he became, in his enforced solitude, conscious of the whole extent of her power over his fate, the words and warnings of his dying mother again sounded in his ears, and would not be silenced.

Angry and irritated at his own weakness, Mortimer again and again mentally argued, or at least strove to argue down these intrusive recollections. Why should he suffer them now to oppress him? Was he not pledged to Sybil? Had he not willingly, and even eagerly, sought her hand? And could he now, at the eleventh hour, yield to such visionary misgivings without dis-

honour? Once her husband, he should know all; and that all, as she had herself assured him, would amount to so very a trifle, that he could not fail to smile at his own curiosity. Yet still the shadow lingered. While constantly in the presence of Sybil he cared for nothing, thought of nothing, save the passing hour; his heart and his fancy were alike satisfied, and he regarded his marriage only as a distant contingency; but once abandoned to his own solitary reflections, and compelled to look into the future as well as upon the present, the jealousy of his nature rose up in arms, and his reason rebelled against his passion.

What, however, availed that reason now? Sybil was his betrothed wife, and the argument was strengthened by the selfishness from which no human being is wholly free; to be happy, he must be happy with her—she had become necessary to his existence. This one blank and weary day had revealed how little he sufficed to himself; and then—by the conviction his reverie took a brighter hue, and he began to shape out in his own fancy such a scheme of life as would have renewed the golden age.

Pity that the materials with which fancy loves to build should be so frail! What mighty fabrics of mortal blessedness should we not create about us

if they were more substantial ! But as the child erects its castle of cards only to see it crumble and disappear upon the slightest touch ; so do men too often rear those goodly schemes in prospect which, like the gold of the fairy-gift, prove mere ashes when in possession.

At an early hour on the morrow Mortimer was at The Grange ; and this time he was admitted without difficulty. Miss Delamere had left her chamber, and was already in the southern parlour. He needed no announcement, for with this ceremony he had long dispensed ; and opening the door softly, he entered. But his arrival produced no change in the attitude of Sybil ; and he was instantly struck by the change in her appearance. She was lying upon a sofa with her face buried among the cushions. Her hair was drawn away from her forehead, and gathered into a large loose knot at the back of her head, evidently without care ; a morning dress of white muslin was rather folded about her than adjusted to her figure ; and there was an air of negligence about her whole person so foreign to her usual habits, that it at once bespoke the presence of some overwhelming sorrow.

Mortimer detected this at a glance, and in an instant he was by her side.

“ Sybil, my own Sybil, what has happened ? ”

Sybil started, and raised her head; and if Mortimer had been struck by the change in her general appearance, he was still more startled by the alteration of her countenance. A deep crimson flashed upon her cheeks, her swollen eyelids betrayed a night of tears, her lips were pale and quivering, and her hand trembled as he took it in his own.

“ Speak, my beloved ! Tell me, what is the meaning of this wild grief ? ”

“ Frederic ! ” she murmured almost inaudibly ;
“ I dare not ! ”

More and more bewildered, Mortimer gazed upon her like one in a dark dream ; but she was unhappy, she was crushed beneath some weight of sorrow, too great even for her to bear, and he forgot at once all save his love : “ Nay, you *shall* speak, Sybil !—Sybil, are you not mine ? Have I not a right to share your grief, arise from what cause it may ?—Should you have any secret from me ? ”

But Sybil was still silent, although her sobs became audible.

“ Lean on me, dearest !—There, hide those swollen and weary eyes upon my bosom, and tell me all ; ” pursued Mortimer more gently : “ You

know not what you make me suffer by this suspense. To see you thus, and to be refused your confidence, is more than I can bear. Have mercy on me, Sybil; and tell me what mean these tears!"

Miss Delamere only shook her head despondingly.

"You wound me deeply, Sybil;" said her lover; "but I will not urge you further. I shall appeal to your mother."

"Frederic! Frederic!" gasped out his companion, as she flung her arms about him to retain him in his seat; "For pity's sake—for mine—if I have indeed been dear to you,—breathe not a word of this misery to my poor mother,—It would kill her did she know its cause!"

"Torture me not, then, my own love!" implored Frederic, as he yielded to the pressure of the beautiful arms which still rested upon his neck, and sank upon his knee beside the couch; "but let me learn from your own lips the cause of this violent emotion. Have you lost a friend? Your fortune? Your gestures deny this. Has any one dared to injure or insult you?" And the eyes of the speaker flashed as he put the question.

A more violent burst of grief was its reply.

“Yes—I have guessed aright!” he exclaimed vehemently, as he sprang to his feet with a flashing eye and a bent brow: “And now, Sybil, I entreat no longer; I *insist* upon an instant explanation of this mystery. As my future wife, I command, in this at least, your obedience. Your honour is in my hands, and none shall dare to sully it by a breath.”

In a moment, but only for a moment, Miss Delamere, thus adjured, buried her face in her hands. When she withdrew them, she was pale even to ghastliness, as she took a letter from her bosom in which it had been concealed, and with averted eyes held it towards her companion; who, scarcely less agitated than herself, tore it hastily open.

As he hurriedly devoured its contents, the whole frame of Mortimer shook with suppressed rage; and he gnawed his lip as though he would have wreaked that vengeance upon himself which could not be poured out upon his enemy.

“It is a goodly scrawl!” he at length exclaimed bitterly: “The work of a vile incendiary, who has not dared to affix his foul name to the revolting slander. But it is false, false as hell, Sybil!—No tongue has dared to prate as this assassin states—no thought has ever polluted your

fair fame. Again, and again I swear to you that it is false! Have I for one moment concealed my purpose in frequenting your house? Is it not notorious throughout the neighbourhood that I have been for months a suitor for your hand? Is not your own mother beneath your roof? Out upon such devilish but puny malice—my very heart heaves against the coward lie!”

“How am I sunk!” sobbed Sybil.

“Sunk! Nay, dearest, rather say how are you exalted in my eyes by this jealous sensibility to all that touches your honour. Never to me have you seemed half so noble; but, I beseech you, calm your grief; it cuts me to the soul, for it shows me that it is I who have armed this writer with his unhallowed weapon. Yes, Sybil, it is I; who, spell-bound by the happiness of the present hour, have too long forgotten that I have as yet enforced no right to its continuance. It was too much to hope that a meddling world would leave us to our holy and hallowed affection until we had placed it beyond the reach of comment and suspicion. There is a serpent in every Eden, and the crawling reptile has now invaded ours. But there is a remedy, a holy and blessed remedy for the evil, my beautiful beloved—we will delay it

no longer ; and the snake will be innoxious when we have robbed it of its venom."

A smile shone through the tears of Miss Delamere ; and, as again Mortimer resumed his seat beside her, she gradually suffered herself to be consoled by his ardent and affectionate reasoning. Once more the colour returned to her cheek and lip ; and she hung upon his words with an earnestness that made him doubly eloquent. She said little, but that little sufficed to convince him that he was the happiest of mortals ; and as they sat with their hands locked together, and her head pillowed upon his shoulder, he almost blessed the anonymous correspondent who had revealed to him the moral excellence and shrinking delicacy of his beautiful and injured Sybil.

" And now, my own one ;" he said tenderly as he prepared to depart ; " we have each sufficient occupation both for our thoughts, and for our time. You need rest, however ; and while you strive to obtain it, I will not lose a moment in seeking out the vile author of this atrocious calumny. Let him not hope to escape. It is not so easy to disguise any handwriting as it may appear to be ; there are always some peculiarities, trivial and slight perhaps, but, nevertheless, perfectly suscep-

tible of identification, by which the writer may be traced with proper care and caution; and trust me, your present correspondent shall not escape."

"Frederic;" whispered Miss Delamere with an appealing look; "Will you consent to make me *quite* happy?"

"Can you doubt it, Sybil?"

"Then, love, restore to me that letter, and let me destroy it."

"Do not ask me what I cannot grant. I will not be cheated of my vengeance."

An expression of intense anxiety passed over the features of Miss Delamere; but she instantly recovered herself; and with her sweetest smile, she again extended her hand, as she said emphatically: "This is the first time that I have ventured to claim a favour at your hands; and I will not be so denied. To me your present intention brings a twofold anxiety—First, Frederic; answer me—how can I feel one moment's peace while I know you to be engaged in a search which must at once irritate and pain you; and by which, if you are successful, you only involve yourself in newer and more dangerous difficulties?—while, as regards myself, do you imagine for an instant that I can be happy while such a document is in existence? No—until that bitter and blighting scrawl is

destroyed, I *must* be wretched; for does it not brand me with disgrace?"

"Enough, Sybil, enough!"—exclaimed Mortimer, as he folded her in his arms, and pressed his lips upon her forehead; "You have conquered; and I forego my vengeance."

"My own dear Frederic!" murmured one of the sweetest voices in the world, as the torn fragments of the obnoxious letter fell in a shower upon the carpet; "Now, indeed, I know that you love me."

Five minutes afterwards Mortimer was gone; and Sybil, having listened to the sounds of his horse's feet until they were lost in the distance, slowly rose from the sofa; and carefully gathering up the shreds of paper, threw them one by one into the fire which was blazing in the grate; and then, having satisfied herself that they were all destroyed, cast one long triumphant look round the apartment, and threw herself again upon her seat.

CHAPTER IV.

SEVERAL months had, as we have already stated, elapsed since the death of Mrs. Mortimer; and Time, that great physician of the mind, assisted by one of the most amiable and unselfish dispositions in the world, had restored Gertrude to comparative happiness. Grateful for the protection which had been so frankly afforded to her, at a period when it was sorely needed, she had studied to accommodate herself to the exigencies and peculiarities of her aged relative with a good faith which insured her ultimate success. And already the effects of her gentle influence were palpable; not only in the general appearance of the gloomy little house, but also in the manner of its rigid mistress.

The arrival of all the orphan's domestic treasures had at first grievously annoyed and disturbed Miss Warrington; who, as she saw package after package unladen from the heavy road-waggon which nearly blocked up the narrow street, clasped her hands tightly together, compressed her lips until they became almost invisible, and sat bolt

upright and speechless; until she comprehended, from the exclamations of her matronly attendant, and the expostulations of the two sturdy porters who were engaged in carrying the things into the house, that not only was the entrance-passage entirely choked up, but that the kitchen-stairs, and even the kitchen itself, had likewise been invaded. Then, indeed, she recovered in some degree from her consternation; although it was only to express her dissatisfaction in a cold, dry, sarcastic tone, which to poor Gertrude was more painful than the most violent exhibition of temper.

“Really, Miss Mortimer;” she said, and not even the tension of her lips relaxed, as she looked her full in the face; “I feel that I have been very inconsiderate. You must have found yourself terribly inconvenienced in my house before your furniture arrived; and I greatly fear that you will even now be at a loss to dispose of it consistently. My passage is scarcely wide enough for a piano; nor do I think that an inlaid bookcase will accord particularly well with the general style of my property. But, perhaps you have an idea of moving to a larger residence.”

“My dear madam!” exclaimed the orphan, as she sprang forward and seized the reluctant hand

of the querulous old lady; "I do not know what to say to you—how to apologise. I was not aware——"

And poor Gertrude, who was already overcome by the munificence of her cousin, and the affectionate letter which had accompanied his gifts, burst into an irrepressible flood of tears.

"Nay, nay, niece, this is foolish;" said Miss Warrington less harshly; "I dare say that you did not expect such an unloading of the Tower of Babel as this;" (the good lady's verbal illustrations were usually somewhat confused;) "so don't cry, for that will not clear the passage; and it will be necessary that we should get upstairs to bed. We had better, therefore, be thinking of what had best be done. Two cases of books!" she ejaculated after an instant, as if unconsciously; "Who on earth is to read them; and where are they to be put?"

"Please, ma'am;" said Hannah, intruding just within the door of the room a face heated by exertion, and a stout arm bared above the elbow; "the men can't bring in any more of the things, for there ain't room, unless we take some of them upstairs into miss's sleeping-chamber; are we to carry them up?"

"Inquire Miss Mortimer's pleasure;" was the

unsatisfactory 'reply; and the discomposed old lady looked stiffer and harder than ever.

"Oh! yes, yes;" eagerly exclaimed Gertrude; "anywhere—anything—good Hannah; I will soon unpack the cases, and send them out of the house. Indeed, my dear madam;" she added appealingly, as the maid disappeared; "it is those unwieldy wooden boxes which create all this confusion; and when once we are rid of them, you will be surprised to find how little they contain."

"I have long ceased to be surprised at anything, niece;" said the still unappeased mistress of the house; "and it is at least fortunate that your huge chests will supply us with firewood for the winter."

At length, when the room of Gertrude had been converted in appearance into a well-packed warehouse, through the civil exertions of the porters, ingress and egress were once more rendered possible; and Miss Warrington unclasped her fingers.

The orphan hailed with delight this symptom of returning composure; and found courage to allude to the future arrangement of her recovered treasures; but vainly did she suggest how admirably the piano would stand between the windows, and how charmingly the book-case would fit into the recess beside the fire-place. Miss Warrington was

resolved to consider the introduction of these elegant superfluities as a grievance ; and declared that, as she detested music, and never read anything save her Bible, her rooms should not be lumbered by any such useless incumbrances.

Gertrude was silenced. She had intuitively felt from the first, the utter futility of reasoning with her protectress, and the impropriety of thwarting her wishes ; and accordingly, she began to consider how she might the most conveniently accommodate these two bulky luxuries in her own small apartment ; resolving, at the same time, that she would conscientiously refrain from reading in her aunt's presence, or disturbing her by the sound of the instrument.

The sacrifice was a severe one, but the orphan was beginning to be schooled in self-abnegation and restraint ; and thus the determination, untasteful though it was, failed to bring a cloud to her young brow.

Such had been the reception of Mortimer's offering ; and for some weeks, Gertrude carefully abstained from intruding any of her little possessions upon the notice of her aunt. Through the agency of Hannah, who soon conceived an affection for her young mistress, as she persisted in calling her, the obnoxious packing-cases were

broken up, and duly stowed away for winter fuel; and as, with the exception of the piano and the book-case, all the other articles were small, she experienced less inconvenience than she had anticipated, in arranging them in a manner calculated to satisfy her aunt.

The effect of their possession upon herself was most salutary. She no longer felt alone; no longer deserted. Every object by which she was now surrounded spoke directly to her heart, and drew her back again into the past. Her white-washed walls were gladdened to her eyes by the sketches of the dear old house at Westrum, which had so often fondly occupied her leisure; her toilette sparked once more with cut glass and porcelain; and as the sunbeams penetrated the branches of the venerable trees before her window, and threw their chequered light upon the table, there were moments in which she almost deluded herself into the belief that she was once more *at home*. And then her books!—there, indeed, her store of happiness was inexhaustible; and they were the more endeared to her by the fact that the fly-leaf of each bore some affectionate record; and that they thus spoke to her from beyond the grave.

The honest-hearted old woman, who formed in

herself the whole establishment of Miss Warrington, was astounded by the magnificence which rendered the apartment of Gertrude so dissimilar to the remainder of the house; and was never weary of examining the elegant futilities with which it was crowded; but, shrewd enough to comprehend that half the annoyance of her mistress on their arrival had arisen from a jealous feeling of the contrast which they would offer to her own faded and bygone treasures, which she had for years been accustomed to regard with reverence, she carefully abstained from all mention of her admiring wonder in her presence.

Thus, for a time it would have appeared as though the stately old lady had altogether forgotten the incursion which had been made upon her premises; but it was not so. Her first apprehension had been that Gertrude might pride herself on this acquisition of luxury, by which she was rendered, in a great degree, independent of those about her; and however much she gloried in her own personal independence, she could not brook that the orphan whom she had befriended should thus be enabled to dispense with her good offices.

It was, perhaps, a pardonable weakness; and it was, at all events, a very common one. She did

not relent, therefore, until she had become perfectly satisfied that, far from presuming on her unexpected good fortune, her mild and gentle inmate had become only the more attentive, kind, and thoughtful; as though she felt that a tacit apology were needful for the annoyance to which she had innocently subjected her hostess.

Miss Warrington had, however, by indulging the suspicion unwittingly, created a great difficulty for herself; for when, strong in her conviction of Gertrude's innate amiability, she resolved to recant her objections to the due enjoyment of these newly-acquired luxuries, she was at a loss how to make the concession without a compromise of her dignity.

She was revolving the subject in her mind, as she had already done several times before, on a bright summer evening, when, shut into the dingy little parlour, while all was fair and sunshiny without, Gertrude was busily engaged with her needle in the service of her aunt; and during a pause in their monotonous dialogue, a wandering Italian boy took his stand before the house with a barrel-organ, and began to play the Barcarole in Masaniello.

As the first bars of the melody met her ear, the hands of Gertrude fell powerless upon her lap,

and she panted with emotion. In another moment she sprang from her chair, and rushed to the window; where she stood trembling, smiling and weeping, in a breath.

"Well, well;" said the old lady with a grim smile, which was the most engaging expression of which her countenance was susceptible; "There is no great harm done if he does see you; for one of these people does not come to Bletchley for twelve months together, so that we may afford to give him a few pence."

But Gertrude did not hear a word. She heard nothing, felt nothing, was conscious of nothing but the sound of music; and this was the first to which she had listened since she had become indeed an orphan. Every pulse in her heart was stirred; the "old familiar strain" had carried her away—away—through time and space; and she was quivering with a sense of happiness to which she had been long a stranger; and which she had often failed to feel even when an auditor of the most finished performance.

The sound ceased; the musician was remunerated; and the spell was broken. The dingy parlour appeared more dull than ever, and the monotonous needlework more wearisome; but, meanwhile, the grim smile still rested on the features of the old lady.

"You seem uncommonly fond of music, Gertrude;" she commenced, delighted at the opening afforded by the appearance of the Savoyard; "and yet I have never once heard you touch your piano since it came into the house."

Gertrude looked up cheerfully, although the tears were still glistening in her eyes, as she replied: "I feared to disturb you, my dear madam."

"Nonsense, nonsense, child;" said her companion; "you see even that hurdy-gurdy, or whatever it was, did not disturb me; but perhaps you have not room to play in your own chamber. Send for Jones, and let your instrument be brought down stairs. It strikes me that it would stand very well between the windows."

"Oh, how kind you are!" exclaimed the delighted girl earnestly.

"And while he *is* here;" pursued the old lady, inwardly moved by this unstudied emotion; "he may as well disencumber you of your book-case: your room is too small to accommodate so large a piece of furniture."

"Oh, how happy you make me!" again ejaculated the excited listener; "and my work-frame, my dear aunt, and my painting-table,—will you admit them all?"

“As you will—as you will;” was the reply; “but charge Jones to be careful of the walls as he comes down stairs. Nothing tears a house to pieces like moving furniture; and I cannot afford to new paper the passage for the next five years.”

Two months after this conversation it would have been difficult for any one to have recognised Miss Warrington’s hitherto dingy little parlour. By imperceptible degrees a score of elegant trifles were successively introduced; even a vase of flowers was permitted to stand upon the polished table without comment; for the quick eye of the old lady immediately detected that the careful Gertrude had placed it upon a minute mat of her own working. Ere long the dull-looking walls were relieved by some admirably-executed water-coloured drawings from a well-stored portfolio; and the village carpenter, after a few hints from the fair artist, succeeded in producing some creditably-made frames, which were neatly covered with morocco paper by the same skilful fingers; the dark curtains which fell in gloomy masses like the folds of a pall were next discarded, and gossamer draperies of spotless muslin supplied their place.

An air of elegance and ease had succeeded to the squalor and desolation which had formerly

been the characteristics of the house; and all had been done so quietly, so simply, and so unostentatiously, that even the rigid and independent Miss Warrington almost forgot that she was indebted to another for the increase of comfort about her.

Gradually, also, Gertrude emancipated herself from the excessive thralldom which had confined her entirely to the premises of her aunt; and in her plain mourning-dress, and closely veiled, ventured to ramble about the immediate neighbourhood of the village.

Her demeanour was so undeniably correct, that even Miss Warrington herself could advance no valid objection to her enjoyment of this necessary exercise; and thus the orphan found herself once more enabled to commune occasionally in solitude with her own thoughts.

That they were generally very sad ones can scarcely be subject of surprise; but there were, nevertheless, moments in which the natural beauties by which she was surrounded drew her on from the past to the present; and taught her to feel that life still possessed much for which she had reason to be grateful.

We have already described the approach to Bletchley; but, cheerful and picturesque as it was, Gertrude soon discovered that the village pos-

essed still greater beauties than those with which she had already made acquaintance ; when, turning her back in the direction of the high road by which she had travelled, she wound round the base of the grassy height crowned by the modest church, and found herself surrounded by the original hamlet, upon whose skirt the dull and straggling street, of which she was now an inhabitant, had grown up as its population had increased.

The whole landscape was essentially English in its character. It did not boast one grand or striking feature ; there was neither rock nor torrent, dense forest nor foaming cataract, to be seen on any side ; but all was calm, rich, and almost holy, in its beautiful tranquillity. In the distance a chain of undulating hills, clothed with beeches, shut in the prospect ; and as she stood and gazed, with all the joy of a liberated captive, and all the enthusiasm of an artist, upon the scene before her, the declining sun poured a flood of glory upon the quivering leaves which glittered like jewels in the light.

The evening wind, as it sighed along the branches, brought with it the odour of the clover and the cinquefoil, which had been mown during the heat of the past day ; and the tinkling sound

of the sheep-bell on the hill-side. The luxurious lowing of the cattle from a warm, snug-looking, and substantial farm, nestled under the southern slope of the range, was heard at intervals, as, after having resigned their milky hoard, they wound their way to an accustomed pasture; while the song of the nightingale occasionally broke forth, as if in welcome of the coming twilight.

In the bottom of the valley lay a hedge-bordered road, over which the picturesque hay-wagons moved lazily along, to the music of the green and waving corn, which rose and fell with a deep murmur, like the waves of some summer sea, as the breeze passed over it—amid the perfume of the wild-rose and the woodbine, the white clematis and the elder; and crushed with their heavy wheels the transparent and classical cups of the bindweed, which, not content with girding the hawthorn boughs with its fairy garlands, as if to replace the departed glories of their own spring-loving blossoms, trailed its graceful wreaths far across the path; while the spotted fox-glove started up beside the little cress-covered stream that glided noiselessly along, and the bluebell rang its tiny chime like an elfin choir.

From the road which we have just described commenced a slight, smooth ascent, known as

Bletchley Green, the little common of the hamlet, whereon the horse of the curate, and the donkey of the cottager, met upon equal grounds. On the verge of the road stood the modest, and once the solitary inn of the hamlet; a plain, unpretending cottage, the extreme ruddiness of whose brick-built front was subdued by a casing of pale-coloured cement; the ancient and approved sign of the Red Lion was lettered, not illustrated, on the swinging sign; and a rude bench extended its hospitable length along the house for the accommodation of the weary traveller, while a deep trough, constantly supplied with water, offered refreshment, in its turn, to the jaded steed.

From that point commenced the chief charm of Bletchley Green. The modest cottages of dark gray stone, peeping out from their leafy screens like bird's-nests occasionally overgrown by the honeysuckle and the creeping-rose; their carefully-tended little gardens, spreading to the right and left, gay with marigolds, and stocks, and gilly-flowers, among which the bees made constant music as they flew to and fro, sating themselves with sweets, or clustered about the neatly-thatched hives which were ranged in goodly order along the grassy path.

There is something gladdening in the aspect of

a cottage-garden, rich in all the usual vegetable produce which helps the poor man's meal; and cherishing all those familiar and old-fashioned blossoms which horticultural societies and scientific florists are rapidly sweeping from the surface of the earth. Certain it is, too, that flowers nowhere prosper so well as under the eyes of cottagers. Their geraniums, their fuchsias, their hydrangias, even to their pansies and their anemones, are frequently finer than can be found elsewhere. Horticulturists may tell us that the cups of their tulips are "muddy," and that their dahlias are botanically imperfect; I, for one, care not if it be so; for it is not the less a fact that they grow lovingly and sturdily in the cottage-garden, while they often look, in a more richly-prepared soil, and under more scientific tending, as though they had been forced into unnatural uniformity; just as the glad gracefulness of childhood is palpably coerced by the discipline of the dumb-bells and the back-board.

To conclude the digression, however, and to return to the village—Advancing and receding irregularly, now flung back by the rustic builder, in order not to interfere with the growth of a fine old patriarchial ash or elm, and now standing closer to the public path, that the little willow-

shaded pond within its enclosure might not encroach too much on the convenience of the inmates of the dwelling, the quiet and modest cottages extended along one side of the Green, almost to the crest of the nearest hill; while, on the other, they gave place to grass fields, and patches of wheat or barley; or, still more grateful to the eye during the sultry noons of summer, stretches of mangel-wurtzel, with its large, heavy, dark-green leaves.

But the charm of Bletchley Green was the "Great House;" a vast and imposing mansion which looked down upon the hamlet from a slight acclivity. A splendid specimen of the solid architectural taste of the times of the eighth Henry, it spread its lordly terraces, and extended its hanging woods across the whole brow of the ascent, until they were parted only by a low and ancient wall from the grave-yard attached to the little church already named.

The whole scene was calm and beautiful; and as Gertrude at length reluctantly turned away in order to return to her unpicturesque home, she heaved an unconscious sigh; for the time-touched and stately mansion, with its venerable woods, had brought back to her a thousand memories of Westrum, and the other dear old house which

had cradled her youth. It struck her, too, as strange that in that dearth of subjects on which to converse together, Miss Warrington should never have mentioned the near neighbourhood of such a residence as this; and the rather, as the whole appearance of the place evidenced its inhabitation. Gentlewoman as she was by birth, even although crippled in fortune, she was decidedly eligible as an acquaintance at the Manor-house; and Gertrude, in her moral solitude, could not forbear a wish that this resource had been open to her.

Again and again her thoughts reverted to that noble mansion and its embowering woods; and the modest tea-equipage was no sooner removed in the evening, than, as she resumed her work, she resolved to question her aunt as to its inhabitants.

"Oh, they are rich people, very rich people;" replied the old lady quietly; "and far too grand to visit any one in Bletchley. The crimson-curtained pew, which you must have noticed opposite the pulpit, belongs to them."

"Then they are absent;" remarked Gertrude; "for it has remained empty every Sunday since I arrived here. Several times I have determined to inquire the name of its owners, but it has always escaped my memory."

“ Their name is Armstrong ; and Hannah tells me that they returned home two days ago, after an absence of three months. Here or there, however, it signifies little, for they are seen only at church.”

“ Are they, then, so very haughty ?”

“ Yes—no—I really cannot tell how to answer the question. They are free enough with the poor, and let no one want in the village if they know it ; but their house is always full of company, and they are for ever driving or riding about the country ; but, as they prefer the upper road when they go to the post-town, they never pass this way.”

Gertrude sighed. She could not but feel that it *was* mortifying to know that there was refined society within her reach even here, and yet that she was shut out from all hope of participating in its enjoyment. A moment’s reflection, however, sufficed to restore her to a more healthy frame of mind ; she remembered that her circumstances were changed, and that she could no longer associate with the rich and the happy upon equal terms ; and a flush rose to her cheek as she felt how little fitted she was, either by habit or association, to endure the mortification of any other species of companionship.

The subject was consequently dropped ; for it

was one in which the old lady evidently took not the slightest interest, and upon which Gertrude had as little inclination to dwell.

And so three days more passed on, in the same wearisome routine as usual; and it was with delight that the orphan, on the morning of the fourth, hailed the return of the Sabbath. Sunday was to her, indeed, a day of rest and happiness; the holy services in the rustic church, the calm and impressive manner and the simple eloquence of the venerable pastor, the only guest who ever passed the threshold of her aunt, and for whom she had already learnt to feel a reverence and regard, which he repaid in fatherly and affectionate kindness; the respectful and quiet demeanour of the simple congregation; and that holy calm which ever pervades the country on a sabbath-day—all conspired to make it a festival to the heart of the orphan-girl. Her plain and mourning toilette was soon made; the solitary bell of the low church rang out over hill and valley; and, with her aunt leaning upon her arm, she once more advanced to the narrow pew of which she was a constant occupant.

The infirmities of age rendered Miss Warrington a slow walker, and the service had just commenced when they entered. For a considerable

time Gertrude did not raise her head, for she had at once sunk upon her knees as she took her place ; and when she at length did so she threw back her veil, and remained looking earnestly towards the clergyman, totally absorbed by the pious offices in which she was engaged. It was not until the sermon was nearly concluded that she chanced to glance in the direction of the curtained pew of the Armstrongs ; and she almost started as she perceived that she was an object of observation to more than one of its occupants. She instantly withdrew her eyes, but even in that momentary glance she had remarked that it was tenanted by four individuals ; an elderly gentleman, elaborately powdered ; a portly dame of about the same age, and two younger ladies, apparently their daughters. She perceived, moreover, that, with the exception of those of the matron, who was evidently absorbed by the rector's discourse, the eyes of all its occupants were, in their turn, directed towards herself.

The fact was, however, a very simple one ; as she was, in all probability, the sole stranger at that moment in the sacred edifice, and sufficiently distinguished by the simple but striking elegance of her appearance from the rest of the congregation to excite observation ; and the only effect produced upon her by the conviction that she had

been an object of remark, was her care to avoid all further glances in the direction of the Squire's pew.

Ere long the service drew to a close; and, once more supporting her aged relative, Gertrude left the church, just in time to see the inhabitants of the Manor-house enter their plain but well-appointed chariot, and disappear.

"There go the Armstrongs;" said the old lady, as she drew her large cloak more closely round her, and leant heavily upon the arm of her young companion, while they threaded their way among the graves; "All the petty gentry of Bletchley will now be once more busy with the doings at the Great House; and all the poor secure of help for the next three months. Our good rector always looks cheerful when they are in their places, for they lighten his duties by their kindness to the sick; and so do the school-children, for they are sure of not being overlooked in some way or another."

"Could they have a better or a holier welcome home?" exclaimed Gertrude, as a tear swelled in her gentle eye.

"I don't know;" was the matter-of-fact reply; "they must do something; and I suppose their pride suffers less from charity than sociability. At all events, you now know, and have seen, all that you ever will know or see of the Armstrongs.

CHAPTER V.

THE Armstrongs were a good old family, and the Manor-house was worthy of its owners; although the estate was somewhat shorn of its pristine splendour. Once the lordly domain of Sir Courtenaye Armstrong, to whom belonged alike, mansion, village, wood, and hill, it had in process of time passed to the grandson of his niece; who, in order to render himself legally eligible to hold the property, had by royal patent assumed the name and arms of the Armstrongs; although the spurs of the brave old knight were not fated to be buckled on by his descendants, who had successively shown themselves rather addicted to the sports of the field than to its perils; while the extent of the property had gradually contracted under the pressure of debts and difficulties.

Enough, however, still remained to render the manor of Bletchley one of the finest estates in the county; and if the present owners were a shade less popular than they might have been among their immediate neighbours, that circumstance

might safely be attributed to the fact, that neither by station, education, nor habits, were those neighbours eligible to the acquaintanceship to which some among them so eagerly aspired.

But while the petty gentry and wealthy farmers looked with some asperity and indignation upon what they considered as the undue haughtiness of the Armstrongs, the prayers of the needy were secured to them by their unremitting attention to their wants; the schools and the poorhouse were rich with their gifts; and the cottages of the labourer and the peasant gladdened by their benevolence.

The head of the family was an honest, hearty, single-minded, and somewhat eccentric man, who was in perfect good-humour both with himself and all his possessions; and quite satisfied to live and be merry as long as he could, in this best of all possible worlds; and who, as he saw prouder and nobler neighbours gradually rise up around him, and occupy with their more modern mansions, and grace by their more high-sounding titles, portions of the land which had once acknowledged only an Armstrong as its lord, remained perfectly careless as to the exact position assigned to him by county etiquette, on those occasions when the said neighbours, who had obliged him by assisting in the

consumption of his venison and claret, in their turn invited him to their tables; satisfied that Lord John, or Sir Harry, were only *parvenus* in the county after all; and that they would have given, and gladly given, no small portion of their broad acres to have felt themselves, as he did, even stronger in the past than in the present, as he sat among the monuments of his ancestors, and remembered that they had been lords of the same soil for centuries.

A good landlord, an indulgent master, and a liberal patron of all the local charities, Mr. Armstrong was permitted to doze away the five-and-thirty minutes generally occupied by the weekly sermon of the rector, in his comfortable and well-cushioned pew, without much comment; while the demeanour of his better half was so perfectly irreproachable, as she sat in the most scrupulously perpendicular position, immediately facing the minister, from whose countenance she never once permitted herself to withdraw her eyes, that she made ample amends for the solecisms of her husband.

Mrs. Armstrong was a portly and comely personage, still possessing some remains of beauty; or rather some trace of the prettiness which had, ere she had scarcely attained her sixteenth year, won the heart of her husband. Fine-tempered, and affectionate, it

was impossible not to love her ; although equally impossible, at the same time, to repress an occasional smile at the little absurdities into which she was continually betrayed by an education barely *ébauchée*, and a remnant of romance which offered a strange contrast with her portly person and faded face.

The girls were well-bred, well-mannered, and well-looking ; a century in advance of their parents as regarded knowledge of the world and social etiquette ; but gentle, dutiful, and exemplary in all the relations of domestic life : while their only brother, the hope of his father and the idol of his mother, possessed not only a fine person, but one of those upright and noble natures which tend to exalt humanity.

Yielding and indulgent upon all minor points, Ernest Armstrong was firmness itself in all matters of principle and right feeling : incapable of bartering one worthy impulse against personal interest or self-aggrandizement, or of committing one disloyal action for the gratification of a selfish caprice. And yet even he was not without his faults. Who is so ? He was aware of both his personal and acquired advantages ; and, perhaps, prided himself a shade too much on each. He was ambitious, too ; and was ever yearning after some vague,

shapeless, and untangible vision to which he was unable to give either a local habitation or a name; but which filled him with vain aspirations after he knew not what, and rendered him less satisfied than he should have been with the actual advantages of his position.

The sun was sinking; and just as its last and ruddiest beam flooded the beech-woods with which the hills were clothed, the wide and lofty iron-gates that opened upon the entrance court of Bletchley House were flung back, and Ernest Armstrong galloped up to the foot of the broad flight of steps, flanked with couchant lions, which led to the door of the mansion, and sprang hurriedly from his horse. The accustomed word of comment or direction was unsaid to his smart groom as he strode into the hall; and there was a cloud upon his brow which told that whatever had been his errand it had sped ill.

The last dinner-bell was ringing as he crossed the green; and he at once proceeded to his dressing-room, and made a hasty toilette, ere he joined the family party, which had already proceeded to the dining-room. On his entrance every eye was turned upon him; but the eager inquiry which had risen to the lips of his fond sisters remained unuttered, as they caught a glimpse of his over-

shadowed countenance; and felt that, until the disappearance of the servants, they must abstain from all questioning.

Mrs. Armstrong was in her place at the head of the table, where she sat smiling at the silver tureen which glittered before her, as she was accustomed to smile on every person or thing which was familiar to her; while "the Squire," as he loved to be called, was as jovial as his wont; and the momentary disturbance occasioned by the tardy entrance of his son once over, he resumed his soup and his subject, without seeming to remark that anything had occurred to darken a brow which was generally as clear and as bright as sunshine.

"They are welcome to all their old castles, say I;" it was thus that he gathered up again the thread of his foregone discourse; "Give me a good, honest, substantial dwelling-house, with well-fitted doors and windows, and only as many galleries and staircases as may be necessary to lead to the rooms. As for your vaults and your dungeons, they may do very well for the dead and the dismal; but again I say, give me a range of cool cellarage, well stocked with generous old wine. I have no taste for such gimcracks; and I hope, girls, that you will never be bitten by

this absurd mania for old clothes and old moveables, which seems to be making such progress amongst us. Nothing but wine and pictures improve by being—what do you call it? Aye, *rococo*—that's the word, and a queer one it is; but nothing that sounded like common-sense would have served to express the tomfoolery of the fancy.—Pass the hock, Ernest, after you have helped yourself. *Rococo* chairs, forsooth! weighing half a ton, and as bolt upright as a promising militia-man at drill; or carved all over, arms, back, and legs, as if to give you a hint of the tortures of the Inquisition by bruising every bone in your skin. I trust never to see any such worm-eaten enormities in my drawing-room.”

“But all those old-world things are so picturesque, papa;” said Eleanor.

“Very!” laughed the matter-of-fact old gentleman: “and so is a rock, but it won't grow cabbages; and the moonlight, but it won't force grapes or pine-apples. Believe me, my dear, that the most sensible and rational taste is that which leads people to appreciate all the improvements that are making from year to year; and to encourage the talent and industry that are required to bring them to bear. If people are to indulge in

whims of *rococo* and their great-great-grand-fathers, everything may as well stagnate."

"And yet, Sir;" said Ernest, as though the remark jarred upon the current of his own silent thoughts; "there is surely some respect due to the memory of the past—some consideration owing to a long line of ancestry?"

"To be sure there is! *We* should be the first to admit that fact, my boy. I am only quarrelling with the abuse of the virtue."

"Then the principle at least is worthy, even in your eyes, papa;" smiled Mary; "and you are candid enough, I know, to concede that this taste for antiquity is at all events a refined one even in its absurdity."

"A refined fiddlestick!" exclaimed Mr. Armstrong good-humouredly; "I am not going to allow you to distort the real meaning of my admission; I venerate the abstract principle: but I detest the finicking demonstrations. I love and reverence tastes that encourage progression, and improve and advance commercial interests, feed the poor and support the artizan. Who ever thought, fifty years ago, of raking refinement out of a garret, and clothing elegance in the faded rags of a dead generation?"

"Still you must admit that there was some-

thing fine and chivalrous in the feudal dwellings of the old barons,"—persisted Eleanor.

"I don't quite understand the meaning of the word, my dear. I am a plain man, and should prefer comfortable to chivalrous, as I read the term, when applied to the building in which I was to live. Stone floors, casements sunk five feet into the walls, and *oubliettes*, may be very romantic appurtenances to a residence; but I am quite unsophisticated enough to be as well pleased with Brussels carpets, plate-glass windows, and conservatories."

"Some castles are very pretty nevertheless, Mr. Armstrong;" softly purred his helpmate; "Only remember the Tower of London! I'm sure when I was a child I used to long to live there."

"Your mother has settled the question now I think, girls;" laughed her husband good-humouredly. "Why, my dear, there is scarcely a stone in the whole building that has not the curse of blood upon it! But now that the fruit is upon the table, and the servants out of earshot—Give this fine ripe peach to your mother, Eleanor—tell us, Ernest my boy, what has gone wrong with you."

"Everything, my dear Sir;" was the moody reply.

“ Why! you don’t mean to say that the new-comers who have invaded the neighbourhood are likely to interfere with the interests of a family which has been seated in the county for centuries?”

“ And yet such is the case, Sir. Of our own tenants we are, of course, sure enough; and were the poor, voters, my mother and sisters would have secured them; but it seems that, with the yeomen and petty gentry, we are by no means so popular. You do not give sporting-dinners like Lord John; nor attend vestry-meetings like Mr. Hellingham; nor do fifty other things which would bring you into familiar contact with these worthies; and thus they have decided that neither yourself nor your son are ‘fit and proper persons to represent them in Parliament.’ Half-a-dozen electors, to whom I made known our intention of canvassing the borough, thanked me somewhat superciliously for the honour which we desired to confer upon them; politely reminded me that, although the name and estate of the owners of Bletchley House were well known to all the county, its inhabitants were strangers in their own land; and gave me civilly to understand that they would have nothing to do with us.”

“ W-h-e-w!” whistled the old gentleman; “ they are inclined to dictate to us our duties,

are they? To draw comparisons between us and a brainless young prodigal like Lord John, who, so long as he fills his house with noisy parasites, cares little for the kind of society which he ought properly to frequent; and a mumbling old meddler like Hellingham, who contrives to keep the parish in hot water, about paltry matters which one dip into his own purse would settle amicably at once? Give it up, then, my boy; give it up at once, I say. What can it signify to either of us that we earn the privilege of adding two capitals to our name upon the back of a letter; and of being abused in the newspapers for holding our tongues when they think we ought to have spoken, or for having given our opinion when they consider that we should have remained silent."

"Yet to be so thoroughly shelved in one's own county is anything rather than pleasant, Sir."

"Why, hang their impudence! so it is, Ernest; and I don't see that we are called upon to put up with it, if you feel any inclination for us to try our strength. We have no reason to shrink before the free eloquence of the hustings; we may not be popular, as you say; but we can have no dirt flung into our faces which we cannot readily wipe off. Do I owe any man a penny?"

Am I ashamed to look any man in the face throughout the county? Can I not answer boldly to my name in any place, and at any time? What do they mean by my being unpopular? We'll try it, Ernest; we'll try it."

"I trust you will, Sir; for there can be no doubt that you are the only legitimate representative of this borough."

"Or you, my boy."

"No, Sir; not I. It will suffice my ambition to follow in your footsteps."

The old gentleman smiled affectionately upon his son, as he replied,—

"But the idea was your own, Ernest; as for me, I should have lived my life out without caring one straw who won the seat, always provided he were a staunch Tory, likely to do honour to his party."

"You should, however, remember that you owe a duty to the county, Sir; all your wealthy neighbours are mere *parvenus* on the soil, while you have only to point to the vaults of Bletchley church to establish your claim, and to justify your position."

"It shall be done, Ernest; it shall be done."

"Then we have no time to lose, my dear Sir; for I understand that two candidates are already in the field."

“So much the better;” said Mr. Armstrong heartily; “there is no honour in walking over the course; so, early to-morrow we’ll commence our canvass. You, girls, must drive into town, mount your smartest bonnets, and lay in a stock of flounces and furbelows, without inquiring too narrowly as to the price; while your dear mother has only to follow up her usual benevolent avocations to serve the good cause more perhaps than we now suspect. There’s Jones too, my attorney, as good and as honest a fellow as ever breathed, will help us, heart and hand, I well know; for half a dozen years ago, he talked to me just as you are doing to-day, Ernest; but you were then at college, and I had no inducement to trouble myself upon the subject. Now, however, the case is altered; and I feel that I have no right to shrink from smoothing your path for the future. But who are the declared candidates?”

“Lord John Somers starts in the Whig interest, of course.”

“Naturally. You seldom know a duke’s son, emancipated from paternal rule, who does not show his independence by opposing his father’s political principles, and establishing himself as a man of the people.”

“ And then—And this is the opponent who is likely to give us the most trouble: there is Sir Harry Vane, Tory to the back-bone.”

“ Aye, Sir Harry is staunch ; it almost irks me to oppose him.”

“ He has, however, already shown that he, on his side, has no such scruples.”

“ All the better, my boy, all the better ; there is the less occasion for delicacy. And if he only doses his voters with new wine, as he did his friends the last time we dined at The Chase, he will not fail to set their teeth on edge, and deliver them over, sad and squeamish, into our hands.”

“ Yet there are persons, my dear Sir, who prefer thin port and muddy sherry to no wine at all.”

“ Which means—? Come, speak out, boy ; you know that I hate all reservations in a family. Let me understand the drift of your remark.”

“ Englishmen seldom vote freely on an empty stomach ; and prefer a shake of the hand to a touch of the hat.”

“ The last I will freely give them ; but I shall hardly brook to feast the Smiths, Browns, Joneses, and Robinsons, under the roof of my ancestors. If I can compromise the matter by feeding them at the Red Lion—”

“Such an arrangement must not even be contemplated;” exclaimed young Armstrong eagerly; “It would swamp us at once. No people are more exacting than voters on the eve of an election; and I, moreover, confess that I was quite unprepared for such fastidiousness on your part, my dear Sir, when I remembered how little you have appeared to insist upon your privileges, and to stand by your order, ever since I have been old enough to remark, and to comment upon your mode of life.”

“What! Because I am so thoroughly conscious of my true position in the county that I am careless of enforcing its rights, you imagine that I should readily play the host to a mob of semi-genteel, presuming, and underbred men, about whom I neither know, nor ought to know, anything?”

“You cannot do without them; and moreover, the election once past, you need no longer annoy yourself or your family by continuing their acquaintance.”

“Nay,—hang it!” expostulated the honest-hearted old Squire; “that were indeed a version of ‘the orange sucked, we throw the peel away.’ Recollect, young gentleman, that the appeal which I am about to make, since you declare that it

must and ought to be made, will be addressed, not to strangers, but to my neighbours; men whose forefathers remember mine; and who would justly consider themselves aggrieved should I carry the matter off in so cool a manner as you advise. It strikes me, Ernest, that such blind and selfish policy would leave the Armstrong interest at a discount, and somewhat interfere with your own views in the event of my death."

"Well, Sir, perhaps you are right; and even in that case you will be no worse off than some of the proudest and noblest of our neighbours."

"Ay, confound it!" conceded Mr. Armstrong; "when a duke's son turns liberal he plays his cards with a vengeance. I verily believe that there is not one owner of a brass-plated door in the whole borough who has not, on some occasion or other, found his legs under my Lord John's mahogany. Still, I say, that I dislike the system; not from personal pride as you well know; but because I *do* think, and always *shall* think, that a line should be drawn, and never overpassed upon any pretext, confining each class of society to its proper limits."

"I hope that you do not intend to sport that sentiment upon the hustings;" said his son with a smile.

“ Confound the hustings !” retorted the Squire, as he filled his fourth glass of port, and held it up admiringly to the light. “ Have your own way, however, my boy ; and arrange every thing as you think best. I suppose in these reforming days all my old-world prejudices must be laid aside ; only thus much I will *not* concede—You and I may make shift to be hand and glove with the male portion of the population, and no great harm can ensue ; but I will have no intrusion on my wife and daughters ; no Mrs. Tomkins or Miss Simkins introduced into my drawing-rooms. Neither Mrs. Armstrong nor the girls are ambitious of a seat in Parliament.”

“ Had Ernest included us in his universal-visiting scheme ;” said Eleanor laughing ; “ I should like to have commenced my social crusade by making the acquaintance of a sweet-looking girl in deep-mourning, who sat in the next pew to the rector’s last Sunday, I do not think that I ever saw a more lovely face.”

“ Or a more ladylike deportment ;” followed up Mary ; “ Who *can* she be ? I never remarked her at Bletchley church before.”

“ Saunders tells me ;” murmured the oily voice of Mrs. Armstrong, as she looked up from her plate, where she had been playing with a piece

of preserved ginger, and listening with secret dismay to the discussion between her husband and her son; "Saunders tells me that she has been here for some weeks; and that she is the niece of an old maiden lady, a sort of decayed gentlewoman, who receives no one but Dr. Simmonds, and although in straitened circumstances owns the house she lives in, and is as proud as she is poor."

"What a pity!" exclaimed young Armstrong suddenly looking up; "Had she only been an uncle instead of an aunt, she would have had a vote."

"Now, fie upon you for a recreant, Ernest!" said Mary playfully; "Here are we talking of one of the sweetest-looking creatures upon earth, and you are coldly speculating upon her maiden aunt."

"You forget that I have never seen this Bletchley beauty, and that we are on the eve of a general election. I promise, however, to favour you with my opinion as to her personal merits before you are eight and forty hours older. Will that satisfy you?"

"Not altogether; as I shrewdly suspect that your decision will be considerably affected by the old lady's politics. If you secure her interest, you will expatiate on the Venus; but should the

ancient gentlewoman read you a Whig lecture, you will see everything 'through a glass darkly,' and turn traitor to your own taste."

"In which case I will bear witness against him ;" said Mr. Armstrong ; "for a prettier little sylph never sported bombazine and crape. Poor thing ! Poor thing ! 'tis but a sad dress for one so young, and apparently so helpless. An orphan, I have no doubt."

"If I thought so—" commenced Mrs. Armstrong, and paused.

"Well, my dear, if you thought so, what would be the consequence ?" inquired the old gentleman.

"Oh, nothing wrong, you may be sure, my love ;" replied Mrs. Armstrong, nervously twitching the strings of her cap ; "Only it struck me that if she really is a gentlewoman, you might not object, although she is poor, to my showing her some civility. I have daughters of my own ; and they will be orphans some day, Mr. Armstrong."

"Not yet, my dear ; not yet, I hope ;" said the squire ; "but you are quite right. If she should really prove to be a gentlewoman ——"

"And if her aunt really has any political interest ;" broke in his son.

The sisters laughed ; and even their father joined in the merriment, as he resumed waggishly,—

"Why, I see no reason to object to your showing her a little attention, if such a prospect does not alarm the girls."

"Nonsense, papa!"

"Very well; the peril be on your own heads; but we must first make some inquiries about the young lady."

"Our good rector, mamma says, is acquainted with her aunt. He will be excellent authority;" said Eleanor.

"Undeniable; so you had better question him upon the subject."

"Poor thing;" murmured Mrs. Armstrong; "an orphan! I shall be sure to like her, for I am an orphan myself."

"Of some years' standing, my dear;" said her husband with a smile; "and probably better reconciled to your fate than this mourning beauty. However, all I have to request is, that you will take no steps in the business until you have consulted Dr. Simmonds. Her appearance is certainly much in her favour."

And the subject dropped. The two girls were anxious to possess a new friend, their mother to do a kind action, and her son to further his electioneering interests.

CHAPTER VI.

On the following day all Bletchley was in commotion. The two Armstrong carriages had traversed the village *de bout en bout*; a circumstance which had not occurred within the memory of "the oldest inhabitant;" but even this marvel ceased to be matter of astonishment, or rather, was absorbed in a wonder still more wonderful, when the barouche which contained the three ladies of the family was seen to stop at the door of Miss Warrington; and, after a brief parley between the portly footman of the Squire and the mature attendant of the maiden lady, Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters actually descended from their equipage, and entered the house.

What could it mean? Never before had such an occurrence taken place at Bletchley; and, although the "professional men" of the adjoining town, who had "boxes" in and about the hamlet, had long considered themselves aggrieved, yet they had always declared themselves delighted, that the Armstrong family had never made the

slightest advances towards an acquaintanceship, which, alike as neighbours and as "professional men," they considered to be justly their right.

And now—when at length the inmates of the Great House had apparently resolved to alter their tactics—How had they commenced? Not by rendering honour where honour might be said to be due; but by making their first visit to an old, impoverished, and uninfluential gentlewoman; who had herself lent a decided aggravation to the case by the fact that, although an inhabitant, and even a householder in the village for many years, she had never swerved from her original determination—not to admit a single neighbour under her roof, save the elderly and widowed rector, to whom she was furnished with a letter of introduction; and whom she consequently considered at once as her friend and her pastor; and Mr. Pilbeam, the apothecary, on the occasion of any indisposition.

Not even the kind attention and sympathy which Mrs. Armstrong had constantly and liberally evinced towards the two invalid daughters of a former curate of Bletchley; elderly maiden ladies, the one deaf, and the other paralytic; and which had been demonstrated in a manner at once costly and delicate, although, in deference to the

wishes of her husband, she had never made their acquaintance; had any effect in lessening their indignation, when, as they sat behind the rusty Venetian blind of their solitary window, amusing themselves, as was their wont, by watching every thing that passed in the dullest of all dull village streets, and informing themselves, in so far as their obtuse faculties permitted them so to do, of all the affairs of their neighbours; they detected the arrival of the lady of the Manor with her two blooming daughters, and their actual entrance beneath the roof of the poor and proud Miss Warrington; who, despite all their own advances, still continued as great a stranger to them as when she first took possession of the dingy old house bequeathed to her by her godmother; and became a denizen of the hamlet.

“What’s in the wind now?” exclaimed Miss Margery; as with a shaking head, she forced aside one of the laths of the blind in order to obtain a better view of the proceedings across the way; “What’s in the wind now?” she repeated, raising her voice to the exact and well-studied pitch which rendered it tolerably audible to her sister; “Is the sky about to rain larks? And are the grandees of the Great House about to favour the gentry of Bletchley with their notice at last?”

“Better late than never;” replied Priscilla shrewishly; “though it strikes me that it would have been more becoming had they paid their first visit to the daughters of a former pastor. However;” she added, stroking into more approved order the neckerchief of snowy muslin which was primitively crossed over her bosom, and sweeping into a capacious basket a pile of sundries representing needlework; “we must not resent the slight, or we shall get no more game and old wine; though our thoughts are our own, and our feelings upon the subject cannot be altered.”

“If you really think they are coming here—” began Miss Margery in her shrill tone.

“*If* I think!” interposed her more captious sister; “There can be no doubt upon the subject to any person of sense; and their having gone first to Miss Warrington’s is in all probability a mistake. You really have no proper pride, Margery; or you must at once see the utter impossibility of their visiting any one in the village, and passing us over.”

“Well, very likely you are right;” conceded the tottering woman so vehemently addressed; “I am sure I do not wish to contradict you; and I was only about to suggest that we had better defer our dinner until after their departure.”

"There is some sense in that, at all events;" said the conciliated Priscilla; "and as the parlour is tolerably tidy, we have nothing to do but to watch for them."

"Ah! Thompson, how are you?" exclaimed the fussy little apothecary, as he extended his hand to shake that of a portly ex-stockbroker; who, having been nearly "cleared out" on 'Change, had retired to Bletchley with his wife and daughter, to exist as they best might upon the dregs of what was once a snug little fortune; "Gay does this morning in the village, eh? The Armstrong carriage, I see, at the door of my patient Miss Warrington—Something new, eh? What can be the meaning of it?"

"Her house is her own;" growled Thompson.

"Why, so is yours, and so is mine; but that fact will not answer my question."

"Your house is *not* your own, Pilbeam, you only rent it; and I am in the same case, or the barouche would have stopped at our doors instead of hers."

"What can they care about that, eh? They are not likely to wish to hire her house."

"Pshaw!" muttered the ex-stockbroker, shrugging his broad shoulders; "The ladies are canvassing, that's all."

“Oh! they are, eh? To be sure they are! How dull I was not to understand the manœuvre. But I must just slip back, and warn Mrs. Pilbeam that she will soon have company; for I have a vote for the borough.”

“Oh! you have, have you?” was the surly reply; Then I won’t detain you, or Mrs. Pilbeam may not have time to change her cap before the enemy are upon her; and you can’t do less than vote for old Armstrong, you know, when the ladies become personal friends. You must pocket your principles, Pilbeam, or you may chance to damage your practice;” and with this parting courtesy Mr. Thompson moved on.

“Surly old brute!” muttered the dapper little apothecary as he hastily retrod his steps towards home; “And a constitution like a horse; the man’s an eyesore to me.”

“What *can* have taken the Armstrongs to old Miss Warrington’s?” said the comely widow of a dissenting minister, who had fixed her residence at Bletchley, in order that her gawky son might profit by the advantages of a Wesleyan school established in the village; “I never was so surprised in my life!”

“I’m not;” was the concise reply of the young hopeful.

"And why are you not surprised?" asked his mother in amazement.

"Because I ain't."

"Well, so you say; but surely you can give a reason!"

"The pretty girl's my reason;" grinned Master Abinadab; "Her son's made her do it. It's quite natural."

"Abinadab!" ejaculated the pious relict of the departed preacher: "What *can* you mean?"

"Just what I say: and I only wish that I could go to church every Sunday, to sit and look at her at my ease; for she's the prettiest girl that ever I laid my eyes on."

"Go to church!" almost screamed the matron; "Go to church, did you say? This must be looked to. How will the discreet and holy Mr. Longwind mourn over you when he hears that your father's son is on the high-road to perdition!"

"You needn't tell him;" was the dogged reply; "and if he even mourned in sackcloth and ashes, he couldn't prevent my saying that Miss Warrington's niece is the prettiest girl in Bletchley."

The widow sank back upon her chair aghast. She had never hitherto suspected that the education of her hopeful son was so far advanced.

Little did goodnatured Mrs. Armstrong, or her

daughters, suspect the commotion which their advent had created in Bletchley; little did they imagine that their visit to the orphan had deferred a dinner, prompted an impertinence, and alarmed the sectarian jealousy of a Wesleyan mother. And yet so it was; and had I, Asmodeus-like, introduced my readers into the secrets of every family in the village, I could have convinced them that the "sensation," as the French designate an excitement of this description, was universal.

Happily ignorant of the fact, however, the three ladies entered the neat and cheerful little parlour in which Gertrude and her aunt were seated, with a single-hearted desire alike to please and to be pleased; nor did they, in that humble habitation, encounter anything which jarred upon their refinement, or prompted them to regret the kindly feeling by which they had been led to visit it.

Miss Warrington, unaccustomed as she had been for years to receive guests beneath her roof, had nevertheless never forgotten that she was entitled by her birth to find herself in the most unexceptionable society, and to hold her place even among the most fastidious on the question of family and breeding; nor was the quiet and somewhat stern dignity of her deportment lessened by a slight shade of displeasure at the fact

that the ladies of the Manor-house had thus forced themselves upon her acquaintance, despite her declaration that she would hold communication with no one in the parish save the rector; and that the politeness now tendered had, moreover, been tardy in its demonstration. Indeed, had the visit been made (as we are, however, aware that it never would have been) before Gertrude became her inmate, and had clothed in comfort and elegance the previous nakedness of the land, she felt that her wounded pride would have been too powerful for her courtesy; for nothing is more easily mortified than the self-esteem of genteel poverty; but now, as she glanced round her modest room, she saw little to irritate or to excite an uncomfortable sensation.

Erect, stately, and unbending, there was no shadow of obsequiousness in the welcome which she uttered to her unexpected guests. Had they been the acquaintance of years she could not have exhibited greater ease or self-possession; and while the whole frame of Gertrude quivered with pleasure, her aunt remained as perfectly unmoved as though she rather permitted than exulted in the compliment which was now paid to her.

The unassuming manner of Mrs. Armstrong, and the honesty of her nature, were well calcu-

lated to remove even the slight feeling of annoyance which the maiden lady had originally been disposed to indulge; and thus, as she listened to the kindly-intentioned but not very profound discourse of her visitor, the fingers of Miss Warrington gradually relaxed their convulsive clasp, her mouth resumed its natural proportions, and even her figure began to lose somewhat of its rectangular rigidity; and meanwhile the three younger ladies were already engaged in cheerful and unembarrassed conversation upon the thousand and one subjects which young ladies love.

The piano, the drawing-stand, and the work-frame, all afforded admirable texts; and before they parted, the happy orphan, who felt her heart once more expand beneath the influence of congenial society, had already initiated Miss Armstrong into the mysteries of a new tapestry-stitch, and promised to assist Mary in a difficult point of perspective.

“I assure you, my dear Miss Warrington;” prattled on the goodnatured lady of the Manor; “that I am delighted to have a neighbour at last. It has not been my fault that I have been so long without one; but Mr. Armstrong is not fond of country neighbours, and it is my duty, you know, to consult his pleasure in everything.”

"In that case, however, madam—" began her listener, with a sudden resumption of dignity, and clasping of the fingers."

"Oh, I know what you are going to say;" laughed the light-hearted matron; "that, in such a case I had better not have come here now; but I assure you, that as regarded yourself, Mr. Armstrong had no objection; none in the world; quite the contrary. I am so glad to know you, and he will be so glad to know you; and the girls will be so glad to know each other; that it is only a pity we did not make out our acquaintance before."

"Let us understand each other, my dear madam; said Miss Warrington, so soon as the volubility of her companion enabled her to profit by a pause; "I am naturally much flattered by the offer of a friendship totally unexpected and unsought on my part; and I beg you to believe that whenever you feel it pleasant to exchange the luxury of your own home for the modest obscurity of mine, I shall always be honoured by your presence; but I never leave my own house; I have not done so for years; never, indeed, since I was left an orphan, and my own mistress."

"How very singular!" said Mrs. Armstrong, with a smile which revealed her still beautiful

teeth ; " we are only five in number at this moment, and three of us are orphans ; for Miss Mortimer, I apprehend ;" she added, sinking her voice to a whisper ; " is also motherless."

" And fatherless ;" followed up her interlocutor, in an accent of deep feeling which could scarcely have been expected from one so rigid, and apparently so passionless ; " Nay, I may almost add, friendless ; for my poor Gertrude has no other protector than myself ; and at my age, I cannot long expect to be spared to her."

" You are quite wrong, my dear lady, quite wrong ;" eagerly replied the kind-hearted Mrs. Armstrong ; " she has a warm and a sincere friend in Dr. Simmonds. He speaks of her in raptures. And I am certain that when we know more of each other, we shall all be her friends. Only see how Mary and Eleanor are getting on ! Now, who would believe that they had never spoken to each other an hour ago ! But, to be sure, our good rector had already made them acquainted with your charming niece ; so I dare say they felt themselves at home with her at once."

Still a shadow darkened the faded brow of Miss Warrington. It would have been easy for a spectator to decide that, in her opinion, the young ladies were " getting on" too fast. They had

turned over all Gertrude's portfolios, had ransacked all her loose music, had unfolded her tapestry, and at last appeared inclined to try the tone of her instrument.

Nor was this closing suspicion an erroneous one; for in another moment Miss Armstrong was seated at the piano, and enabling even the modest orphan to feel that, brilliant and showy as was the execution to which she listened, she could fear no rivalry in that particular accomplishment; in which, thanks to the finished science of Sybil, she was so thorough a proficient, that she had even occasionally glanced at the possibility that, should she ever be reduced to the necessity of eking out her slender income by her own exertions, she might safely depend upon her knowledge of music for a livelihood.

"I have already spoken of myself, Mrs. Armstrong;" said the proud maiden-lady at length, after an evident struggle with her feelings, and under cover of the noise produced by the nimble fingers of the young musician;" And I am now anxious to speak to you of my niece. I am quite sure that you mean nothing but kindness to both of us; but that kindness may work a vast deal of evil to Gertrude. She is a good girl, a very good girl; she has made me happier than I ever ex-

pected again to be in this life ; but I know that she is herself unhappy ; I know that she must be so, under my roof. She has been reared in luxury, and she is poor. I had hoped, and I still hope, to reconcile her by degrees to the great change which has taken place. She has good sense, and good feelings, and she will gradually reconcile herself to her fate, if she is left to struggle against it in obscurity ; but I cannot answer for the effect which may be produced upon her mind by constant association with companions so differently circumstanced as your daughters. I fear that she will begin to repine, to fret, to grieve once more over all that she has lost ; in short, I tell you frankly, that I see nothing but danger and sorrow in the prospect of a friendship with your family."

"Then you do not like us?" asked her visitor, with another sunny smile, which showed how easily and trustfully she anticipated the reply of her companion."

"My only fear;" said Miss Warrington, laying her thin hand upon that of her visitor; "is that we, and above all, that she, may like you too much."

"Thank you! Thank you!" laughed Mrs. Armstrong; "All is then as it should be; Have no

care for the future. As to your pretty niece, she reminds me of the young lady in the song,—

‘ Friends in all the aged she’ll meet,
And lovers in the young !’

and, moreover, I do not despair of making you yourself less unsociable than you threaten to be.”

“I can exercise no control over my niece in such a case;” persisted Miss Warrington, as if unconscious of the closing phrase of her companion; “yet, if I can induce her to listen to me, I honestly confess that I shall endeavour to warn her against the perils of an unequal friendship. Gertrude has at once much to learn, and much to unlearn; and as her future life must be passed in obscurity, the sooner she masters her lesson the happier for herself.

“My *dear* lady!” exclaimed the eager matron; How prosily you talk! Just as if it were possible to foretel the fate of a pretty girl. Who knows but she may make a conquest under our roof? All the world are not seeking for money; and where could any man find a sweeter creature? Why, as I look round your snug little parlour, I see a thousand proofs of care and elegance, such as are frequently wanting in a larger establishment; and you talk of her having a great deal to learn.

“However, we are told you know, that ‘no

man is a prophet in his own country,' so I suppose I must forgive you. But we have really been unreasonable in our visit; we have stayed here an age; and you will be quite tired of us. Mary! Eleanor! Come, my dears; it is time for you to take leave of your new friend, or Miss Warrington will have reason to suspect that we have an idea of claiming possession of her for the day."

The two girls sprang from their seats, and each possessed herself of the hand of Gertrude.

"Good bye, then, my dear Miss Mortimer, for the present; but we shall hope to see you very soon and very often."

The orphan smiled amid her happy tears.

"And I want to show you to Mr. Armstrong, my dear;" followed up the mother; "so you must not disappoint us. What say you to dining with us to-morrow? Now, don't tell me that you are engaged, for I will not believe a word of it."

"Indeed, Madam;" replied my heroine—for radiant as Sybil may appear to many, Gertrude is my heroine—"I had no intention of volunteering so wild a fable. An engagement, since my arrival at Bletchley, has hitherto appeared to me as unattainable as a meteor; but I am dependent upon the will of my aunt, and must first obtain her

sanction, before I gratefully accept so delightful a proposition."

For a moment, Miss Warrington resumed her most rigid perpendicular, and looked the very condensation of a thousand refusals. She was human; and it was impossible quite to forget that she had been an inhabitant of the village for more than twenty years, and that this was the first occasion upon which she had been honoured by the countenance of the owners of the Great House—a favour for which she was, moreover, shrewd enough to perceive that she was even now indebted to their admiration of her young relative. But in the next instant her pride came to her aid; and, resolved not to allow them to perceive and to despise her egotism, she again unbent, and deferred the question to her niece, declaring that she had not the slightest desire to control her wishes.

"Then all is arranged, my dear Miss Mortimer;" said the good-natured Mrs. Armstrong, giving a hearty shake to the hand which she had already taken in the full confidence of success; "And as you may find it pleasant to become better acquainted with your new friends before you are introduced to the rest of the family, the carriage shall be here for you at five o'clock,

Nay, not a word of objection, my dear Miss Warrington; you know that our little village, pretty and snug as it is, does not boast even a fly, and, therefore, you must let me have my way."

Resolved to victimize her own feelings even to the end, and disarmed by the cordiality of her visitor, the maiden-lady forbore all further utterance of her objections; and after a few more parting compliments, the Armstrong barouche drove from the door.

"Why, it can't be possible!" exclaimed the shrill voice of Miss Margery Bayliss, as the long-tortured lath of the Venetian-blind sprang back to its place; "They are not coming here, after all!"

"They may please themselves;" was the angry retort of Priscilla; "*We* want no patronage; *we* are gentlewomen born, and need not condescend to any body. I dare say the mutton is boiled to rags."

"Really, Mr. Pilbeam, you are a great deal too bad!" said his pretty but peevish helpmate; "There go the Armstrongs; actually past the very door, and it is quite clear that they never meant to come here at all; and now I may go and undress again; and put away your best coat, that you have been rubbing to pieces against the back

of your chair for the last two hours. You are always trying to give me as much trouble as you can; thinking, I suppose, that, with five children, and helping you to make up your medicines, I have not enough to do."

"It is not my fault, my dear. You know as well as I do that I have a vote."

But he argued in vain; for the irate beauty had already left the room in high displeasure.

"Aye, they may look about them as they drive along:" said the precocious Master Abinadab, as he watched the departure of the ladies of the Manor: "but it's no use, for, with all their flowers and furbelows, they'll never be able to hold a candle to Miss Warrington's pretty niece."

And there was also another who followed them with her eyes, as the carriage rapidly disappeared; and that other was Gertrude. Stationed behind the muslin drapery of the window, with a beating heart, and a glowing cheek, when she could no longer hear "the wheels of their chariot," she sighed, as though they bore her new-found happiness away with them. Again the past had come back upon her; again she felt that even for her there might yet be some sympathy in store: and then she slowly turned away from the casement, and her eye fell upon the upright figure of her aunt.

“ When you are quite at leisure, Gertrude ;” were the first words which fell upon her ear ; “ be good enough to gather together all those ends of worsted. If Hannah attempts to sweep them up, I shall have my carpet scraped threadbare.”

She was obeyed. The heart-chilled orphan quietly dropped upon her knee, and picked up, one by one, the bits of German wool which Miss Armstrong, in her zeal to learn the “ stitch,” had scattered upon the floor. Tears rose unbidden to her eyes ; the illusion had vanished ; and the cold, bare, shivering reality was once more before her. The unexpected deportment of her aunt during the visit of their unlooked-for guests had surprised and delighted her by its quiet dignity, and she had, for a time, forgotten that it was not the ordinary mood and manner of her aged relative ; but merely a reflection of former years and of former habits, which she would inevitably lay aside, (as the barrister lays aside his wig, and the dramatic queen her diadem,) so soon as its assumption became needless. Still, it had unconsciously, even to herself, increased her respect and veneration for the withered and desolate woman to whom she was indebted for a home ; and when she had risen from her knee, and carefully deposited the offending shreds in the litter-basket

which stood beside her work-table, she approached her affectionately, and said in a subdued voice—

“You are not displeased, I trust, my dear madam, that I have accepted the invitation of Mrs. Armstrong?”

The old lady coughed slightly, and clasped her hands tightly together, ere she replied; “Displeased! Oh, no: I have no right, no wish, to feel displeased; but I would much rather that it had not been given. Visiting is expensive amusement, Gertrude; very expensive amusement; and you cannot afford to visit. However, you know best. But I confess that I should not, under such circumstances, like to squander upon an evening’s pleasure as much as would support me for a week at home.”

“Nor would I do so, my dear aunt;” was the meek reply; “for my conscience would upbraid me, bitterly upbraid me, were I guilty of so great a folly.”

“And are you ready to suffer the mortification of exhibiting your rusty mourning among the gay dresses of your new friends? Are you brave enough to be pointed at as the poor orphan that Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters have taken under their protection?”

“No, madam;” said Gertrude proudly; “I

can boast of no such courage; nor am I, as I trust, called upon to make so great a sacrifice of right and honest feeling. Had I ever dared to confide to you the amount of generosity exhibited towards me by my too liberal cousin, you would be aware how little I have cause to shrink from any contact, even with the elegant and wealthy family with which I shall so soon be brought into collision; while the second, and far more bitter mortification to which you allude, can never overtake me while I am the inmate of your house, and the daughter of your adoption."

Even Miss Warrington was moved, and her thin lips quivered for an instant; nor was it until she had recovered from this unwonted emotion that she resumed,—

"My house and my adoption are, however, very small matters in the eyes of the wealthy, Gertrude; but that signifies little; I only fear lest they should soon become so in your own."

As she ceased speaking the orphan was on her knees before her, her mild eyes swimming in tears, and her lips fastened upon the withered hands which were clasped upon the old lady's knee.

"My only protectress; and, with one far-off exception, my only friend;" she murmured; "have you indeed so poor an opinion of the heart,

so little confidence in the gratitude, of the forsaken and abandoned being to whom, unknown as she was, you so frankly and cordially offered alike a home and a refuge from the world which had cast her off?"

"No, no, Gertrude, you mistake me;" replied Miss Warrington, as at length fairly overcome she bent down, and pressed her lips upon the pale brow of the earnest girl. "It is not because I doubt, but because I have learned to love you, and am jealous of your affection, that I spoke thus. Dry your tears, and forget what has passed. I believe I now know you thoroughly."

"And for ever;" said Gertrude solemnly; "and in order to prove to you that you do me no more than justice, I will at once renounce this new acquaintance which has excited your apprehensions. Half-a-dozen lines to Mrs. Armstrong will suffice, and I will write them now—this moment."

"I no longer apprehend anything, my dear; and I strictly forbid the sacrifice;" replied the old lady. "You say that you can visit these people without expense, and without becoming weary of my poverty, and therefore so let it be, Gertrude. You are young; and heaven knows that the life which you have hitherto led at Bletchley has

been dull enough ; this is your only prospect of a little change, and you shall not throw the chance from you. Bless me!" she continued, looking at her watch ; "It is close upon four o'clock, and we have not yet dined ! Wipe your eyes, my dear, and ring the bell for Hannah."

CHAPTER VII.

It would be difficult to describe the feeling of triumph and exultation experienced by Miss Delamere when she became fully assured of the success of her unworthy and unwomanly act of duplicity. After so long a period of suspense; after so unwearied an exertion of all her powers of fascination and address; she was at length, at the very moment in which she had begun to despair of ever accomplishing her object, about to see all her hopes realized, and all her aspirations fulfilled. She had no time, or even inclination, to congratulate herself upon the fact that she owed her triumph to the fine sense of honour, and upright principle of the man who was to become her husband. She felt only that she had not striven in vain; that she had not suffered any obstacle to deter, or to impede her in her pursuit; that now, at least, she had sown the seed of policy in good ground; and that her resolute perseverance had overcome all impediments, and would produce a rich harvest in the future.

But, amid her exultation, there was neverthe-

less one harrowing recollection, which, like the skeleton of the Egyptian banquets, constantly obtruded itself on her most sunny visions. Sybil still remembered that she was not yet the wife of Mortimer; that she was not yet *safe*; that, until their hands had met at the altar, a thousand unforeseen and inexplicable chances might, despite all her precaution, overthrow the brilliant edifice of her hopes; and that even the delicate and fastidious sense of honour to which her lover had sacrificed all his doubts, all his misgivings, all the entreaties of his mother, and all the quasi-claims of his cousin, might, should it once more be called prematurely into action, prove the most dangerous and insuperable bar to their union.

“ ‘If ’twere well done, ’twere well it were done quickly,’ ” murmured Sybil to herself. To be wrecked in sight of shore were to render ruin tenfold more bitter of endurance. There must be no more idle vacillation of manner on my part. I have awaited sufficiently long already a crisis which I was, after all, eventually compelled to create. His last words have given me a right to act freely and energetically; and I must exert that right. He loves me; thus much, at least, is certain; loves me, and wilfully blinds himself to the fact that he is about to place in my hands, not only

the happiness of his life, but even his freedom of action, and liberty of will. He sees in me only a beautiful and gifted woman; and this is as it should be. He believes, too, that he has probed my heart to the very bottom, and has found there no other image than his own;” and a scornful smile rose to her lip. “And what see I in him? *That*, at least, he has *not* divined. A superb edifice of humanity, it is true; but built up upon a most fragile foundation: a superstructure of pride, and egotism, and vanity, decked out by the *prestige* of a handsome person, and hedged in by what the world calls honour—sensitive, and nice, and jealous honour. The world loves phrase-making, and is satisfied by seizing generalities; but did it search the human spirit to the core, how would it marvel when it discovered out of what poor and pitiful materials some of its most vaunted qualities are compounded! How I loathe those soulless and nerveless beings who are content, in the struggle of their kind for precedence, to sink down tamely to the very bottom of the well of mediocrity, and to abide there without a murmur, content to see from their dreary pit the half-dozen stars, or the one struggling sunbeam, which, more in scorn than kindness, penetrates at times the depths of their voluntary darkness, until

the rope of chance drags them thence to exhibit their weakness to the daylight. And what is Mortimer but one of these—an unstable trembler, whose nature has been smoothed into symmetry and polish by prosperity, as the pebble is rounded and varnished by the tide that laves it,—a man whose will can be governed by the first comer, as the vane is governed by the wind? Even now I cannot trust him; but look back upon the past and tremble. Has not his heart yielded before his self-love? Have I not won his affections by pandering to his vanity? And to-day, even to-day, at the eleventh hour, though I hold his plighted faith, might not one whisper suffice to overturn all my efforts? Let but that whisper reach him, and not even the spells by which I have made him captive would be strong enough to bind him to me—my reproaches would be silenced by allusions to his wounded honour. It is not of me that he would think in such an emergency, but of himself. I see and feel all this, and I have no longer time to hesitate; either his fate is in my hands, or mine in his. We are both gamblers, who have placed our all upon a throw; but he handles the dice like a froward child, and it were degrading to be foiled by so poor an adversary.”

Who that looked upon that beautiful and radiant woman, as she sat with her cheek pillowed upon her small white hand, and her large eyes bent down, and veiled by their long dark lashes; to all appearance absorbed in a tranquil and tender reverie—who could have suspected the deep and concentrated passion which even, at that very instant, was labouring in her bosom? But as the grove and the garden flourish in rich luxuriance, and garland with their perfumed greenery the base of Etna, while the lava-flood boils and burns within its crater, so did the gorgeous loveliness of Sybil Delamere veil the deformity of her moral nature.

And yet it had not been always thus. Only a few short years before, and she had been beautiful in mind as well as in form; but now the hot iron of the world and the world's vices had seared her heart; and had made her what she was.

Poets and romancers delight to paint the love of a woman's spirit in rainbow tints. The rhythms run more glibly, and dance along in softer cadences, when they embody joy, and grace, and harmony:—It is more pleasant to describe Arcadia, than to borrow images even from the Pandemonium of Dante himself. But no true woman's love ever yet ran through all its course in sunshine: many

and many a dark shadow falls upon the stream-clouds, sometimes weeping themselves away in innoxious tears, to be forgotten when shed, but often—how often!—big with storm, and lurid with the lightning-flash.

Some escape the tempest, and learn to look back with a smile upon its perils: others fail beneath the trial, and are overwhelmed; while the bolder and the more desperate ride upon the wreck; and, like the syrens of old, lure others to the same ruin.

Some such reflection as this floated across the mind of Sybil as she at length looked up; and her proud lip wore an expression of bitter self-reliance which betrayed the working of her secret spirit. She had forgotten, she knew not for how great a length of time, that she was not alone; and now, as she glanced towards the *fauteuil* of her mother, she saw Mrs. Delamere with the usual novel in her hand, but with her eyes fixed upon the ceiling, and evidently as completely absorbed in thought as she herself had lately been.

“ You must wear a gayer aspect than you now display at my approaching marriage, my dear madam;” she said, startling her companion by the suddenness of her address.

“ I thought that all was at an end:” was the

faint reply ; “ I confess that I had lost all hope, However, you know best, Sybil.”

“ All would, indeed, have been at an end, had your conjecture been a correct one ;” said Miss Delamere, forcing a laugh ; “ but surely you should have had more faith in my—what shall I call it ? my fate, my star, or—if the plain term will not shock you—my management.”

Mrs. Delamere sighed.

“ ‘ One swallow,’ say the proverb mongers,” pursued the younger lady ; “ ‘ does not make a summer ;’ nor, believe me, does one failure make a defeat. I was yet young enough to strive, and I have striven ; I vowed to succeed, and I have succeeded. I am loved, mother ; loved as I have never before been.”

“ And you, Sybil ; what of yourself ?”

“ Of me !” echoed her daughter, with a second ringing laugh, which sounded hollow and unnatural ; “ I made no vow to feel, as well as act. I had much to revenge ; much to repair ; I shall soon have done both ; but I have played only with my head ; my heart was no party to the game.”

“ Can you always silence it ? If not——”

“ If not, I can stifle its rebellion ; the task will be no new one.”

“ And have you told him *all* ?”

Miss Delamere started in her turn.

“Do you ask me if I am mad? If I have poisoned my own draught, and fired my own roof-tree? Do you not know that we are almost penniless, and that Mortimer is our last hope?”

Tears, large and silent, coursed each other down the pale cheeks of her listener.

“No;” pursued Miss Delamere, in an accent so resolute that it was almost harsh; “I have *not* told him all, or a few months hence we should have been beggars; and, moreover, he has no suspicion that our apparent wealth will, when he seeks to grasp it, be converted, like the fairy gifts of the nursery fable, into leaves and ashes. Nay, do not look so scared; I have overcome more serious difficulties than this, and I have no inclination to shrink before my last trial. He is too sensitive, too tenacious of the world’s opinion, to be trusted with a secret like mine; which he shall never know or learn, until the knowledge must be borne.”

“And yet, Sybil——”

“I am aware of all that you would urge;” pursued Miss Delamere with undisguised impatience; “but, in my case, such scruples could only be misplaced. I have read Mortimer to his heart’s core; and I have not now to learn where he

would fail. Fear nothing for the future ; once his wife, I shall be able to mould him to my will—he is insufficient to himself—but this is a fact which no man will concede, even to his own reason ; and in the solitude of his own thoughts, like the wind-harp, he does but give out the sounds awakened by an extraneous influence.”

“ Surely ;” murmured Mrs. Delamere, with a slight shudder ; “ these are dangerous sentiments for one about to become a wife !”

Sybil smiled bitterly.

“ Is it dangerous for the traveller to perceive the gulf which he has to pass, or the precipice he is about to skirt ? Should I be safer were I to close my eyes to the probabilities of the future ? I have not now to learn that when a man really loves, he does not content himself by casting down before his mistress, as Raleigh did, the mantle from his shoulders, but prostrates at her feet, alike his tastes, his prejudices, and his will. You will tell me, perhaps, that Mortimer has done all this ; and you will be right ; but beyond even this there is yet a step. Touch, though never so lightly, the sense of honour upon which he prides himself, and, at whatever cost, he will immolate all other considerations to that one phantom. And now, answer me ; am I in a position to volunteer the revelation you seem to consider fitting ?”

Mrs. Delamere was silent.

“Let me but retain my secret;” continued Sybil, evidently rather communing with herself than addressing her companion; “and Frederic Mortimer shall not long remain the inert and vacillating being he has hitherto shown himself. There are some natures—and such is his—which cannot exist without extraneous support; and although, like the vegetable parasites, they may blossom while twined about the sustaining props of a hardier plant, and assume at least a semblance of vigour; yet when left to their own poor resources, they either grovel along the earth, and become sullied by the dust with which they blend; or, in endeavouring to elevate themselves for a season, only exhibit their intrinsic weakness, and become the sport of every breeze that passes over them. This has so far been his career; his aspirations are noble, but they evaporate in words; his strength exists only in his egotism; he is like one of those incongruous pictures which we sometimes look upon without well knowing whether to sigh or to sneer; a grand outline marred by the minor touches. Had he not been a weak man he might have been a great one.”

For a few moments she was silent; and it was with a smile of haughty bitterness that she at length rose from her seat and resumed;—

"I have now proved to you that my study in his case has been a profound one; that I shall do nothing rashly; but that I have even formed projects for the future which are at least partially unselfish. Now, however, when the moment for action has arrived, I must think only of myself. I have already suffered enough, more than enough; I will be no willing victim a second time. Yes;" she added, with flashing eyes and clenched hands, as she paced the apartment passionately; "I have lived to listen to words which told me but too plainly the height from which I had fallen—to find myself considered merely as a coveted toy, where I had once been an idol—to see myself compelled to repay insult only by a smile—and shall I not be revenged for this? shall I tamely brook the degradation from which I may free myself by my own efforts? Little do they understand the nature of Sybil Delamere who believe it possible. As the wife of Frederic Mortimer I may defy even *him*; and I will defy him, aye, to the very death!"

"Sybil—my dear Sybil—what mean you?"

"You would know my meaning?—Listen, then. Recal the past; live over again for an instant the last few years; remember how *he* loved me—how he pursued me—how he flung every thing at

my feet, and asked me only to stoop and gather up the offering—You cannot have forgotten all this, for not only every memory, but every fact of our present existence is linked with those days—and now learn that it was to renew his suit that he was lately here——”

Mrs. Delamere leant forward in her seat with eager eyes and parted lips.

“Yes;” continued Sybil in a hoarse whisper, as she paused before her mother; “Yes—he sought me once again; but not as formerly—not with sighs, and protestations, and entreaties; but boldly, lightly, and unblushingly; with the eye of a conqueror, and the lip of a libertine——”

What more she might have added is uncertain, for as the last words escaped her quivering lips, Mrs. Delamere fell back insensible upon her cushions.

For a few moments Sybil remained looking upon her unhappy mother, without making one effort to restore her to consciousness; although the flush faded from her cheek, and her clenched fingers relaxed. The storm of passion which had shook her spirits to the very centre, had, for a time, crushed even her powerful energies, and rendered her reckless of everything around her. Ere long, however, she recovered her composure; and without summoning other assistance, at length suc-

ceeded in restoring the scattered senses of the wretched Mrs. Delamere; which she had no sooner effected than she asked bitterly,—

“And now, Madam, have I not silenced all your scruples, and satisfied all your objections? Would you still ask me to trifle with my last prospect of social redemption? Have I not sufficiently expiated the past to have some claim upon the future? And shall I not more honourably fulfil my destiny as the wife of Mortimer, than as the mistress of Sir Horace Trevor?”

Mrs. Delamere swept her trembling hand across her eyes; they were hot and tearless; she had previously suffered deeply for years, but the iron which had hitherto only seared her spirit, had now entered her soul. She made no reply to the harsh questionings of Sybil, nor did there need any; for, regardless of their reception, Miss Delamere had no sooner given them utterance than she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ Now *do* listen for five minutes, Ernest, while I tell you all about Miss Mortimer ;” said Mary Armstrong, as, with one arm about the neck of her brother, she bent over him while he ran his eye along a list of names, spread on a table before him.

“ I know all that you have to say ;” he replied with an impatient smile ; “ She is very pretty, and very bashful, and blushes beautifully ; and is quite delighted by the condescension of the ladies from the Great House.”

Mary laughed. “ You have made a wretched guess. Pretty you knew she was, for you had seen her at church ; but as for the rest—”

“ Richards ;” murmured the young man, still intent upon his task ; “ We are sure of him, I think ; he is a tenant of our own. Richards, twenty-six.”

“ She is not a whit less at her ease with strangers than Eleanor or myself.”

“ Indeed ! all the worse, perhaps, both for her and her friends.—Thompson—oh, aye, Thompson

of River Farm—doubtful, I fear; for I know that he is as obstinate as a mule, and as wrong-headed as —”

“Ernest, you are too bad. I have a great mind not to say another word.”

“You could not oblige me more, for you see that I am fully occupied already. But, by the bye, what about the old woman’s interest?”

“You must canvass her yourself, for we were by far too well engaged even to think of this horrid election.”

“How very provoking!” exclaimed young Armstrong; “But you women are always useless in matters of importance. Why did you not take me with you? While you were turning the head of the niece I should have managed the aunt.—Collins?—was it not Collins, Mary, who had an execution in his house last winter?”

“To be sure it was. Do you not remember that papa became security for the debt, and how grateful he has been ever since?”

“I thought so; then I may fairly calculate upon him. Collins, twenty-seven.”

“Well;” said Mary desperately; “as I see that you are determined not to listen, I shall tell you no more about Miss Mortimer, but leave you to form your own opinions to-morrow.”

"And why to-morrow?"

"Because she dines here."

"Dines here? Impossible."

"Impossible as you may think it, she does dine here; and, moreover, the carriage is to be sent for her."

"Then we are sure of her interest."

"I was not aware that she had any."

"But her aunt must, as a householder, and the dinner tomorrow secures it."

"Well, upon my honour, Ernest;" said Miss Armstrong; "you are a perfect recreant. Why, even papa himself would be more gallant. But I warn you not to calculate without your host, for Miss Warrington appears to me to be a very impracticable old lady."

"Oh, never fear; I'll exert myself, and flirt with the niece."

"I am not quite sure that you will find that task so easy as you appear to imagine."

"Very likely; but in a good cause I am prepared to go great lengths; and as she is really very pretty, I'll sacrifice myself without a murmur."

"Papa will be infinitely indebted to you."

"Of course he will;" replied the young man, extending his arms in a long yawn, which he

terminated by drawing his sister closer to him, and pressing his lips upon her cheek; "and to tell you the truth, Moggy, I shall not be altogether sorry to compensate myself by a little fun for this weary work; for, after all, it *is* weary work; and were it not that I expect Somerville down in a day or two to back me, I should almost feel inclined to give it up in disgust; but Somerville is a famous fellow, and an old hand at canvassing."

Mary made no reply, but a vivid blush stole over her cheek and brow.

"Well, and now, as it appears that I must hear all you have to say about the little cottage-maiden;" he pursued after an instant's silence; "pray favour me with it at once. You found her very pretty, very gentle, and very captivating, it seems."

"We found her what we certainly did not venture to anticipate;" replied Mary, rallying from her momentary confusion; "a finished gentlewoman."

"A Bletchley gentlewoman, of course?"

"You are too provoking, Ernest, and I shall leave you to make your own discoveries."

"Thank you; but, just now, I have not time to venture upon any; so shall content myself,

should the fair Sylvia prove as lovely across a dinner-table as she does at a distance, with cautioning Somerville, who has a strong dash of sentiment in his composition, not to fall in love with her. He is fond of 'Love in a cottage,' and 'Love among the roses,' and all that sort of thing; and should he become thrall'd by her bright eyes, he will reserve all the smiles and flatteries which he has promised to diffuse liberally among the electors' wives and daughters, for her especial benefit; an arrangement, Miss Moggy, which would materially affect the success of our canvass."

"And you expect him in a day or two, did you not say?" Mary ventured to inquire, as she turned aside, and affected to be busily engaged in removing some withered leaves from a plant which occupied a *jardinière* near her.

"In a day or two;" acquiesced her brother with another formidable yawn; "and I heartily wish that he were here now. Do you know, Moggy, I had no idea that the Armstrongs were so unpopular about Bletchley."

"I am sure they ought not to be so;" replied Mary, somewhat indignantly; "both papa and mamma are a sort of Providence to the poor; there is no distress which they do not seek to alleviate; no sorrow which they do not soothe. If

I were papa, I would not even seek to stand for their stupid borough."

"Come, come; we must have no treason in the camp;" laughed Ernest; "remember that you ladies are our light troops, and that we expect good service from you all; aye, even Miss — what did you call your new wonder?—even she must be made useful."

"What nonsense you talk, Ernest; one would imagine that we had picked up some poor little peasant, towards whom no ceremony need be observed."

"Ceremony! why surely you do not mean to imply that much of that frigid commodity will be required in the future acquaintanceship with which your newfangled fancy has provided the family!" said young Armstrong with a somewhat contemptuous smile; which so irritated Mary, that she turned on her heel and left him, declaring, as she reached the door, that she would no longer encourage such ill-timed and misplaced impertinence.

"Why, you cannot surely be angry in earnest, my pretty Moggy?" he expostulated.

"Not angry, but sincerely pained;" she said steadily. "Is it because Miss Mortimer is poor, Ernest, that you should thus persist in a tone unsuited to the occasion? However, I have already

wasted more time with you than I can well spare, and I will now leave you to your more congenial employment."

"Not with a frown, at all events. Give me at least a kiss before you go."

Mary was not inexorable; she lingered for an instant; and as her brother whispered in her ear, "To oblige you I will even promise to fall in love with your *protégée*," she could no longer retain her displeasure; but shaking her finger at him, said laughingly, "Always in extremes, as usual; I have an equal horror of Scylla and Charybdis, so if you seek to please me, you will steer a middle course."

And with these words she disappeared; while young Armstrong, returning to his seat, soon lost all memory of the discussion over the important list of voters which he had been previously studying.

"Well, well, we must make the best of it now;" said Mr. Armstrong, when informed by his wife of the invitation which she had given to Miss Mortimer; "but you have exceeded your commission, Charlotte. You know how carefully I have eschewed the petty gentry of the neighbourhood, and now you have saddled me with a woman from Bletchley."

"She is so pretty;" expostulated his good-natured helpmate.

"So much the worse; these pretty underbred young women play the deuce in a family, especially where there is a grown-up son. Besides, a month hence we shall have the house full of company; and if you are to be consistent, you will be compelled to introduce this girl to people who will be as little pleased with her as she will be at her ease with them; by which means you will succeed in annoying all parties."

"But the girls like her so much—"

"Of course they do; young folks are always delighted with a fresh face, and have no objection to a foil;" said the squire; "but I detest the principle. It is at once unfair and unhandsome."

"I'm sure, if I had thought that you would be angry—"

"I am not angry, Charlotte, but I like every thing in its proper place, and this poor girl will be out of place here."

"Somehow or other;" said Mrs. Armstrong, who was not fastidious in her familiar phraseology; "Somehow or other, my dear, I think you'll change your mind when you see her."

"I hope I may;" was the abrupt retort.

And he did so.

On the morrow, when Gertrude entered her aunt's little parlour, simply attired in a plain close dress of black crape, with a single white camelia half hidden among her luxuriant hair, even the obtuse Miss Warrington could not help thinking that she had seldom seen anything more beautiful than the gentle orphan; who, with eyes sparkling with anticipated happiness, and cheeks slightly flushed, appeared only anxious to conceal from her protectress the extent of her new-found joy.

"Why, you look like an angel, Gertrude!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"May I always so look in your eyes;" was the meek reply; but at that moment no thought of vanity mingled with the heartfelt and innocent delight of the fair girl. It was not that she had forgotten the past; it was not that she had ceased to mourn in secret over her buried hopes; for, alas! the memory of suffering is like the poisoned bale, which when opened and examined, spreads pestilence over all with which it comes into contact; but she was young, and she had been living for months in an ungenial and chilling atmosphere.

Grateful, deeply grateful, as she felt to the aged relative who had received and cherished her, they had scarcely a thought or an impulse in common; differently educated and differently constituted,

they had neither a taste nor a habit which could assimilate; and the unhappy girl was hourly pained by the conviction that neither time nor circumstances could enforce a greater congeniality between them.

Naturally open-hearted and confiding, Gertrude was compelled to exercise a constant restraint over herself: for she had at once discovered that her nature could never elicit any sympathy from that of her aunt. Even her advantages of education and refinement, instead of proving a source of consolation, were, in her peculiar position, an aggravation of suffering, and a cause of trial. Like all persons who have outlived their particular epoch, and who are unable to comprehend the progress which has taken place about them, Miss Warrington looked with suspicion and distrust upon all that she was unable to bring down to the level of her own understanding, and became irritated by every appearance of superiority; while destitute, save in rare moments of excitement, of both tact and sensibility, she frequently wounded where she believed herself to be simply uttering the merest common-places; and withered the young and sensitive nature of her niece by an antiquated display of worldly wisdom, as mistaken in its expression as it was repugnant in its principle.

No wonder, then, that Gertrude looked forward with her first feeling of recovered happiness to any congenial companionship. Had she been less nobly endowed by nature, or less pure and lofty in mind, she might have recurred to the chilling inference of her aunt, that she was about to be looked upon as "the poor orphan whom Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters had taken under their protection;" but no such suspicion darkened the spirit of the orphan. She had been accustomed from her girlhood to meet the world upon equal terms; and she was unconscious that it could ever be otherwise, or that her altered fortunes might affect the feelings of others towards her. Had she, indeed, learnt this bitter lesson, it might have dimmed her eye and paled her cheek, to reflect that she was about to brave such an ordeal; but strong in her honest single-heartedness, no misgiving came to mingle with her delight; and as she alighted at the door of the Manor-house, she thought only of the kindly words and smiles with which she had been bidden there.

When she reached the stately drawing-room, into which she was ushered by a venerable, grey-headed servant, she found it tenanted only by Mrs. Armstrong; whose greeting, smiling and

courteous as it was, was still somewhat constrained. She was trembling, poor woman! lest her lord should not like Miss Mortimer so well as she herself did, and was consequently afraid of making too much progress in their acquaintance.

But, although the conversation languished, Gertrude found ample amusement in admiring the fine oak-panelling of the spacious apartment, with its delicate carvings and grim old family portraits. To her such a room was fifty-fold more attractive than any modern saloon, tricked out with the myriad costly baubles which tell no tale of the past; and her bright eye wandered hither and thither, from the steel-clad cavalier to the wigged and frowning judge; and from the prim and powdered dowager to the bland and graceful maiden, undisguised even by the mass of hair and plenitude of petticoat which half concealed her age; unconscious that her hostess was ill-at-ease, and anxious only to find herself once more in the society of the two amiable girls who had penetrated like sunbeams into her dreary home.

She was standing, rapt in admiration of a fine full-length, by Reynolds, of the late proprietor of the estate, upon which the last ruddy tints of the setting sun were lingering in a blaze of glory, when the door suddenly opened; and, as she

turned with a throbbing heart to receive, as she believed, the greeting of her young friends, she found herself confronted by a slight and handsome man, whose extreme likeness to the portrait by which she had been attracted, caused her inadvertently to start; nor was she singular in her emotion, for the surprise exhibited by the intruder as his eye met hers, was equally apparent.

In the next instant, however, he advanced; and his bow was at once respectful and courteous, as Mrs. Armstrong exclaimed in a tone of undisguised relief; "Oh, I am so very glad that you are come, Ernest, for the girls are sadly late to-day! Miss Mortimer, my dear, Mr. Ernest Armstrong, my son."

Gertrude curtseyed, and resumed her seat; while the young man, who had promised to sacrifice himself by flirting with the cottage-maiden in order to secure her aunt's interest for his father, was evidently at some loss how to commence his undertaking. He had, indeed, previously seen her more than once, but never as he saw her then; her graceful and delicate figure revealed in all its symmetry by the soft drapery of her transparent dress; her fair brow crowned by a diadem of sunny hair; and her whole appearance indicating the elegance and refinement

which are attainable only by the well-born and the well-bred.

There is a description of beauty which speaks only to the senses; and which, pleasant as it may be to look upon, creates no diffidence in the spectator; and such was the beauty which Ernest Armstrong had prepared himself to meet, from the few and imperfect glimpses which he had occasionally obtained of Miss Mortimer. He had anticipated, also, the blush and flutter of an inexperienced girl suddenly launched into a sphere of society unsuited to her habits; and he was comparatively amazed to find himself in the presence of a beautiful and high-bred woman, at once modest and self-possessed.

One glance sufficed to show him all this; while every word she uttered only increased his admiration. The sunniness of her smile, the softened brilliancy of her speaking eyes, the varied expression of her lovely and animated countenance, and the rare and beaming charm of intellect which diffused a new beauty over what was already beautiful, together with those transient shades of melancholy which her early trials had rendered a portion of her nature; all combined to bewilder his imagination and to fascinate his feelings. His mother had, indeed, found a diamond in the desert.

Meanwhile Mrs. Armstrong, encouraged by the evident pleasure of her son, resumed her usual composure. Where Ernest, with all his fastidiousness about women, took so little pains to conceal his admiration, she could no longer doubt that his father would be equally satisfied that her discrimination for once had not been at fault. Perhaps she might have been less satisfied with her own generalship could she have known, that already, although half-an-hour had not elapsed since the introduction, her son was secretly lamenting the unlucky chance which had brought Henry Somerville, the most popular man in London, to the Manor-house, before he had secured the claim of previous acquaintanceship with the beautiful young stranger. And never would Ernest Armstrong himself have so heartily rejoiced to learn that Henry Somerville was already engrossed by a passion for his sister Mary, as he would have done could it have been whispered into his ear at that moment.

Unconscious of the effect she had produced, and wholly absorbed by the happiness of once more finding herself in congenial society, the heart of Gertrude beat calmly, and a bland smile played about her lip. The sisters, on their entrance, welcomed her with a warmth which even satisfied

Ernest; and although the old gentleman at first met her with a cold bow, and a grave courtesy which was almost chilling, his brow soon relaxed; and as he led her to the dining-room, his eye rested upon her beaming face a moment longer than it need have done.

"Have you yet commenced your flirtation with the pretty villager?" asked Mary maliciously, as she followed in the wake of her mother, who had taken the arm of Mr. Somerville, leaving her daughters to the escort of their brother.

She was answered only by an impatient "Pshaw!"

"Remember that her aunt must have some interest in the borough;" followed up Eleanor gaily; but Ernest made no retort.

"Do you really not admire her?" asked Mary anxiously.

"Do we admire the angels!" demanded her brother in reply; "I can scarcely believe her to be human."

"My *dear* Ernest!" expostulated both the girls somewhat alarmed; "what *can* you mean?"

"To 'fool you to the top of your bent,' what else?" said the young man, making a violent effort to restrain himself. "Do you not know that both my head and heart are now too fully occu-

pied by votes and voters to have much attention to spare even to so pretty a girl as your village divinity?"

Reassured by this reply, the sisters seated themselves at table; Mary in quiet gladness beside the brilliant Somerville, and Eleanor near her new friend. The meal passed in unusual cheerfulness, for Mrs. Armstrong was silently congratulating herself upon the evident satisfaction of her husband; while the Squire himself, startled out of his ordinary exclusiveness by the beauty and elegance of his fair guest, and gratified by the arrival of his son's friend to share the fatigue of the approaching canvass, was full of jest and merriment.

The spirits of Gertrude rose under the influence of so genial an atmosphere; and the winning sweetness of her manner, combined with the cultivation of her mind, won upon all around her, although by no means in an equal degree; for, long before the evening came to a close, Ernest Armstrong was what is commonly called "over head and ears in love" with the beautiful orphan.

Although accustomed from his boyhood to frequent the society of his sisters' friends, among whom were many richly endowed alike by nature

and by fortune, Ernest had never hitherto evinced so decided a preference for any one of the fair girls with whom he was brought into contact, as to justify his father in the fondly-indulged hope that he would contract an early marriage; nor had even the raillery of the old gentleman upon a coldness which he declared to imply a degeneracy unpardonable in an Armstrong, produced the slightest effect.

Happy in his family, and devotedly attached to his sisters, Ernest enjoyed the passing hour without attaching any importance to the smiles which were lavished upon him on all sides; returning to the domestic circle, after every temporary absence, with all the cheerfulness and buoyancy that he had quitted it.

Under these circumstances, however he might regret the apparent insensibility of his son, Mr. Armstrong nevertheless consoled himself by the belief that the natural ambition of Ernest would effectually protect him from all danger of forming an unequal, or what he would have designated, an unworthy marriage; and was fain to be satisfied to see year after year go by without any change in the young man's pursuits or wishes. Assuredly the idea was not likely to cross his mind that the village of Bletchley was destined to produce the

fair she who was fated to teach the hitherto insensible heart of his heir that, like those of other men, it was formed of "penetrable stuff;" and he consequently saw no danger in the bright eyes and ruby lips which had nevertheless so soon succeeded in thawing the aristocratic ice of his own nature; for, with all his home-joviality, Squire Armstrong was deeply imbued with that ancestral vanity so common among our old English families; and looked upon his genealogical tree as the noblest possession of his race.

And yet, whether it were the novel manner of Gertrude's introduction to his domestic circle, or that she in truth possessed all the personal and moral attributes which were calculated to thrall his fancy, it is certain that she almost instantly effected an extraordinary revolution in the sentiments of Ernest Armstrong. For the first time in his life he became aware that even his affection for his family, and that yearning after some as yet unexplained good for which he had panted from his boyhood-up, did not suffice to satisfy all the cravings of his heart, in which deeper and softer feelings were nestled, which had never hitherto been awakened from their rest. Unconsciously, even to himself, he had probably formed a *beau ideal* of female perfection which all

his previous experience had failed to realize, and which was now suddenly placed before him; for it is certain that every mind creates its own fabric of brightness; every imagination combines its own vision of beauty; and every taste establishes its own rule of harmony. The world is full of loveliness, but that loveliness affects different persons in a different degree; a circumstance whence must be deduced the fact, that scant justice is frequently rendered to the attractions of some very handsome women, while those of others excite the greatest enthusiasm in the same individuals.

Thus it chanced, that in Gertrude Mortimer were combined all the peculiar excellences which were essential to the taste of Ernest Armstrong; who, affectionate rather than impassioned, could see no charm in a beauty devoid of gentleness and repose; and who was a stranger to that exaggeration of sentiment, and impetuosity of feeling, which are as brief as they are demonstrative. His temperament partook rather of the genial warmth of the sunshine which lingers where it glows, than of the fiery lava which consumes all over which it passes, only to indurate into stone as it flows onward. His tastes, save such as led him to covet advancement and the world's plaudits, were simple

and refined; and there was a depth in all his feelings which, although difficult to fathom, rendered them equally beyond the power of common events to ruffle or disturb.

To love, with such a man, was to love earnestly and well, and the fact that he had attained his four-and-twentieth year without even admitting to himself a preference, far less a passion, was a sufficient proof that he was not to be misled merely by an excited fancy. Accustomed to analyze and to reflect, he readily detected the false-seeming of the designing and the artificial; while he was keenly alive to all that was sincere, and great, and beautiful. Mature in mind, because alike self-governed and persevering, he could appreciate the mental and moral qualities of others, at the same time that he possessed in himself every necessary attribute to grace and gladden domestic life.

Such was the heart which Gertrude was destined unconsciously to win,—poor Gertrude, who had been slighted and abandoned for a specious and worldly coquette by one who should have known and prized her better; but did human beings always pursue the fitting path, this world would become a paradise, and we should be apt to forget that there is a brighter land beyond.

Little dreaming that the happy evening which she had spent in the midst of smiles, and flowers, and music, was to form an era in the existence of one at least of the party, she consequently took leave of her friends at the Hall with a gladdened and a grateful heart, over which no single shadow fled to mar its joy; and on her homeward drive poured out her spirit in thankfulness to Him who had raised for her so bright an oasis in the desert of her blighted existence; and looked with renewed cheerfulness upon a future from which she had hitherto shrunk with a feeling of desolation and anxiety.

CHAPTER IX.

THE time, meanwhile, was passing very differently with Sybil. Like Gertrude, she had been cradled in luxury, and, like her, she had experienced a reverse; but there ended the parallel. The trials of the orphan had been totally independent of her own actions; while the brilliant Miss Delamere had recklessly rushed upon her fate. Born in the midst of affluence, she had been the child of care and affection, and happiness appeared to be her birthright. The passionate caresses of a weak and indulgent mother, and the ill-judged admiration of a short-sighted father, proud of her beauty, and lavish of his praises, had early taught her the secret of her childish importance; while the uncalculating expenditure by which she was surrounded, imbued her with a selfishness that, even in her girlhood, became the mainspring of all her actions.

To desire was, in her case, to possess; and to possess was ere long scarcely to enjoy. Unconscious, or, still worse, careless of the wants of

others, poverty was to her an empty sound; and human suffering the invention of romance, or the heirloom of a race distinct from that to which she appertained, and, consequently, beyond the pale of her sympathy. Her eyes were never pained by the dismal spectacle of penury, nor her ears importuned by the wailings of the unfortunate. Her sky was all sunshine; and she never paused to ask herself over whose devoted head the clouds had lowered which were swept from her own horizon. If she ever wept, the tears were those of a susceptible vanity, so easily wounded as to be seldom beyond the reach of even the most puny weapon; for she had no other sorrows; and as her whole existence was concentrated in self, so she had no grief to give to the woes of those less richly dowered.

In one respect, however, this self-adulation proved her friend; for, anxious to shine in that world which was the worshipped idol in her luxurious home, she devoted herself with the pertinacious earnestness which formed a strong feature in her character, to the various studies which were rather suggested than urged upon her. In every showy accomplishment she soon excelled; and, overwhelmed by the delighted encomiums of her exulting parents, she learnt to appreciate the

increase of attraction which she thus secured, and turned eagerly to newer and more difficult attainments.

These she mastered in their turn, to a degree which rendered her what she had always panted to become—the envy of her own sex, and the admiration of the other; and the petted, overdressed, and jewel-laden plaything of the drawing-room; the wilful, capricious, and haughty idol of the nursery; and the pains-taking and persevering tenant of the schoolroom, found herself at eighteen “the observed of all observers.”

Something was, however, still wanting; and for the first time in her life she found *that* something beyond her reach, and discovered that she was not all-powerful. Surrounded by the costly appliances of wealth, the reputed heiress of thousands, and the belle of every ball-room; gifted alike by nature and by fortune, Sybil Delamere aspired to exalted rank, and deemed no station too lofty for her merits. In vain did suitors present themselves, to whom even her anxious and doting father could advance no plausible objection; their addresses were repulsed with scorn; and the haughty beauty at the age of five-and-twenty found herself still Miss Delamere.

It is true that she had nobles in her train; but

among these some demurred to her pedigree; others to her undisguised coquetry; and others again, (the weakest of the tribe,) to her somewhat ostentatiously displayed acquirements. She was a delightful companion in a ball-room, a charming acquaintance in a crowd, but none among them wooed her as a wife. They enshrined their idol with the most delicate flattery, but they left her upon her self-erected pedestal.

Nevertheless she untiringly pursued her object. Wealth could not win her; for she was unconscious of its value, never having felt its want; of superior talent she was jealous; for in her inborn selfishness she loved it only as a means, not as an end; while to the gentler and purer charm of genuine affection she was altogether insensible—she sufficed to herself. Every action, every word was measured, and adapted to the one engrossing aim of her life—a marriage of vanity; and nothing appeared impossible to her imperious and ambitious spirit.

Handsome, witty, and self-possessed; as she disgusted one set of admirers by her insolent assumption, she saw new lovers ever ready to chain themselves to the wheels of her chariot; and at length, among the crowd of her admirers she numbered Sir Horace Trevor, a baronet of ancient

family and large estate; who, captivated by her beauty, and the admiration of which she was everywhere the object, laid himself and his fortunes at her feet after the brief acquaintance of a month.

Assuredly such a marriage was far from realising the long-indulged visions of the spoilt beauty; but as he whispered his hopes into her ear during the pause of a quadrille, she suddenly remembered that her youth was ebbing from her, and that she had attained the sober age of twenty-five.

What marvel, then, that she answered by a smile?

A few months subsequent to this engagement, Sybil lost her father; nor was it until upon his death-bed he revealed the fact, that she became aware of the hollowness of her position. She had, indeed, long been standing upon a sand-heap, which was rapidly crumbling away beneath her.

The principal of a mercantile house which had for several generations ranked as one of the most wealthy in the country, Mr. Delamere had sacrificed to ostentation and self-indulgence so large a portion of his capital, that he had found it necessary to enter into extensive and hazardous speculations in order to retrieve his fallen fortunes; but, naturally sanguine, reckless, and indolent, he had, by

such means, only increased his difficulties ; and now, in his last hours, when he should have put from him all thoughts of the world, and the world's vanities, he found himself compelled to humble his proud spirit before the wife whom he had ruined, and the daughter whom he had deceived ; and to confess that he had for years existed upon the credit so long and so laboriously created by his predecessors, while he was, in fact, almost a beggar.

He told his tale, and died.

With what feelings it was heard by his appalled and helpless wife, it were idle to attempt, even for an instant, to describe ; while upon Sybil it produced no more powerful effect than surprise. To her the idea of approaching poverty could only convey a mass of vague and undefined images ; she attached no tangible meaning to the word. Her father had declared, while the large tears fell slow and cold upon his wasted cheeks, that henceforward there remained nothing to his family save the strictest necessities of existence ; and Sybil, with a smile, had bidden him cease to grieve for this at least, as they should be rich enough with these.

And if the dying man, even amid his blind and doting adoration of his brilliant child, marvelled,

despite himself, for a moment at the cheerful self-abnegation of one who had never hitherto displayed so holy and beautiful a forgetfulness of her own interests, the mistake was a happy one, and served to smoothe his downward passage to the tomb; for even he, in such an hour, ceased to remember that his prized and pampered Sybil numbered among the necessities of every-day life equipages, and jewels, and piled carpets, and silken draperies, and all the gaud and glitter of fashionable existence.

But even had Miss Delamere been enabled to form a more correct estimate of the essentials of life, she would still have regarded with perfect philosophy the change which had so suddenly come over her fortunes; for she remembered her engagement, and consequently felt herself free from all apprehension for the future. Sir Horace Trevor was sufficiently wealthy to render such a circumstance unimportant; and she never reflected for an instant that the ruin of her father could affect her own prospects.

Nor was her trust in her lover ill-founded. The baronet, of course, learnt, with the rest of the world that the apparently gigantic wealth of Mr. Delamere had been a mere splendid fallacy; but he was too thoroughly subjugated by the

fascinations of his affianced bride to see in such a circumstance any reason for liberating himself from his engagement; and thus, although when the affairs of the deceased merchant were wound up, amid which the personal debts of Sybil herself furnished no inconsiderable item, and that it was ascertained how very limited a sum remained for the maintenance of the widow and her daughter, neither the vain and weak mother, or her child, considered it necessary to make the retrenchments which their altered means suggested; merely satisfying themselves with such as were enforced upon them by their mourning state, and retiring to one of the country residences of Mr. Delamere, which, by the zeal and self-devotion of some of his tried friends, had been saved from the wreck of his property; and there surrounding themselves with the luxuries and comforts to which they had been accustomed.

Under these circumstances it is scarcely necessary to explain that the capital, which, prudently administered, might at least have insured to the survivors a modest existence, became rapidly diminished in amount; but still no attempt was made by either to defer the impending ruin.

Mrs. Delamere, who had, throughout her whole life, been accustomed to depend on others, aban-

doned the care of her future career entirely to Sybil; who, strong in her prospect of soon becoming Lady Trevor, scorned to admit the possibility of any change in their mode of life.

Had not their equipages been reduced from three to one? — their establishment, from half-a-dozen lounging and powdered footmen, to a solitary male attendant? Had they not withdrawn from the gay world into an almost total solitude?

To the supine and sorrowing mother, such arguments were unanswerable; and with a total ignorance of business, she rapidly satisfied herself that it was impossible to accomplish more; and as she glanced from her crape and bombazeen to the glowing countenance of Trevor, and the evident composure of Sybil, who had voluntarily assumed all the responsibility of their position, she ceased to trouble herself upon the subject.

Thus the year of mourning passed by; and with it passed away also an important portion of the means upon which they had now to depend for their subsistence; but this consideration appeared in no degree to influence the proceedings or feelings of Miss Delamere. As the period arrived at which the widow could once more appear with propriety in the world, she took active

measures to dispose of the pretty villa, which was their last home of early days; and having succeeded in securing an eligible purchaser, completed the sale under her mother's sanction; and forthwith busied herself in appropriating the proceeds to the arrangement of a hired house in an unexceptionable part of town, whence her marriage might take place without derogation, either to her own consequence, or to that of her bridegroom.

Wearied of the monotony of the country, and glad of any change which promised amusement, Mrs. Delamere looked on in silence; and when she once more found herself in the midst of accustomed scenes and familiar faces, she felt no inclination to question the prudence by which her individual comfort was thus enhanced; while Sybil herself, delighted to be once more restored to congenial habits of dissipation, and to become anew an object of adulation and envy, closed her ears alike against the warnings of friends and the sneers of enemies; and plunged recklessly into the torrent of fashion, which received her upon its surface as it is ever willing to do every brilliant bubble, so long as it is able to support itself by its own buoyancy, content to take its revenge upon the hollow mockery when it bursts.

Sir Horace Trevor was assiduous in his homage; somewhat weak, and undisguisedly vain, the loungeur of fashion, who was about to sacrifice what the *roués* of society call their freedom to the charms and fascinations of Miss Delamere, was too proud of the admiration elicited by his affianced wife to find any time, or to feel any inclination, to censure the wanton improvidence which was necessitated by its indulgence. Perhaps he might have desired to see the accomplishments and attractions of the beautiful coquette more immediately exerted for his own gratification; but be this as it might, it is at least certain that none could have discovered such a feeling in his manner; and that, although the name of the brilliant Miss Delamere was occasionally coupled at the clubs, or on the mall, with those of more than one of his most familiar friends, (and that not always with the degree of respect and caution due to a betrothed wife,) he was still to be seen at her side, alike in public, and in the luxurious semi-solitude of her home; as attentive, as devoted, and as absorbed as ever.

The season was nearly at an end. London began to yawn from its suburbs to its very centre. That minute portion of its denizens who insolently call themselves "the world," were hurrying either

to their estates in the country, or to display their wearied glories in foreign courts; the matches which had been arranged during the turmoil of the last three months, were publicly heralded in the "Post," for the edification of the vulgar; and were already engrossing the inventive faculties of milliners, and employing the technical talents of the law. It had been, as was generally allowed by the privileged, an "unusually good spring;" tradesmen were calculating their gains, and mothers smiling over their triumphs. There had been no important deaths "to plunge half a dozen noble families into mourning;" and people had nothing left to do but to rush abroad and become voluntary exiles for the remainder of the year, or to stay at home and "dullify."

Sybil, like the rest, was somewhat worn and somewhat withered by the ceaseless race of dissipation; but this was not all. Among the "fashionable departures for the continent," figured the name of Sir Horace Trevor—Trevor, the obsequious suitor, and the affianced bridegroom—Trevor, the bewailed of the clubs, and the mourned of the dandies—Trevor, the quasi-benedict! What could this mean?

Suffice it that he was gone; and that there was joy and gratulation at the hearth of his

venerable father. It was evident that, be the cause what it might,—and the secret had been, for a wonder, marvellously kept—his marriage was at an end.

In another month, Mrs. Delamere and her daughter left town; and in three more they were domesticated at The Grange.

CHAPTER X.

THE little French clock in the morning-room of Miss Delamere had chimed twelve, and was still ringing out the simple and pretty air of *Charmante Gabrielle*, in that clear and almost unearthly harmony which seems as if created by the movements of a fairy dancing over a peal of silver bells; but its music had evidently no charm for the ear of its brilliant mistress. Attired with a care and coquetry which betrayed her determination to enhance to the utmost the value of her personal attractions, there was, nevertheless, a cloud upon the brow of Sybil which accorded ill with the festal character of her dress. And well might it linger there, for she felt that the next few hours must decide her fate.

As yet Mortimer had not disappointed even the slightest of her anticipations. She had played her game skilfully and boldly, and the stake was almost won. But there was still a difficulty to overcome; and even she, self-sufficing as she was, shrank before it. She had yet to tell

him that she was a beggar! True, she had smiled when her mother alluded to this necessity, and declared the matter unimportant; but when she compelled herself to look closely, and to remember the circumstances under which they had originally met, and the false seeming by which she had maintained her brilliant position, her heart almost failed. Had she not already found it necessary to urge forward her marriage by an expedient which even she herself blushed to recal, although she would not have hesitated to repeat it had there existed need for such a measure? And had she not ventured upon this expedient from a knowledge of the susceptibility of her suitor in all that regarded his honour? Here, at least, she had possessed a strong conviction to work upon; but in her present extremity she was less assured. Of the fervent and almost blind affection of Mortimer she could not entertain a doubt; but she was nevertheless aware that he had wooed and won her under the impression that she was as wealthy as himself; and she could not foresee the effect likely to be produced upon his mind by the discovery of so vital an error.

For the first time in her life she felt that she had overacted her part, and voluntarily plunged into a sea of difficulties. It was, however, too

late for repentance, for she could no longer conceal the real circumstances of her position. Mortimer had already spoken of the necessity of summoning a professional friend for the purpose of preparing the marriage-settlements; and she was well aware that a lawyer was not to be blinded like a lover. Moreover, her pecuniary resources were almost exhausted; she had no longer an instant to lose: all the splendour and indulgence by which she had surrounded herself were about to vanish like a dream; and she bitterly felt that youth and hope would alike pass away with them. All further attempt to disguise her actual situation was impracticable; and even fertile as she had proved herself hitherto in expedients, she was compelled to admit the fact. Nothing was left, therefore, save to avow her utter want of fortune to Mortimer, and to trust to fate and her own fascinations to accomplish a new triumph.

Upon one point alone she was decided—she must not—she dared not—tell him the truth; she knew too well that his rigid sense of right would revolt against the persevering falsehood and dishonesty of her past conduct; some fable must be invented to amuse him, and to interest his sympathies in her behalf; he must not be suffered to suspect that he had been duped.

Such were the reflections of the female Machiavel, who sat surrounded with luxury, and herself the brightest object in that sunny summer-room, awaiting the advent of her suitor ; and well had she calculated her influence over his mind. " Every thing by turns, and nothing long," the very " Cynthia of the minute," she was aware that her strong hold on Mortimer was her infinite variety, which amused his imagination while it bewildered his judgment. Tears had served her well upon a former occasion ; but then it was the fond and sensitive woman shrinking from the first faint breath of blame, and tears were the natural and fitting concomitants of such a grief. Now, it was her pride, not her delicacy, which was in arms. She must show him that she would rather resign even his love than her own self-respect. He must find her with a dry eye and an apparently settled purpose, however that purpose was actually destined to be shaken by his expostulations. But, confident as she was in her powers of dissimulation, she was yet terrified lest, by so utter a change in her worldly circumstances, those expostulations should be withheld ; and now, in her solitude, there was no acting in the terrible emotion which bathed her brow with chilling damps, and made her pulses throb.

A rapid step in the hall, and the hurried opening of the door of her apartment, ere long startled her into renewed energy of purpose; and as Mortimer approached her with joy beaming in his eyes, she extended her hand, and struggled to smile a welcome.

The quick glance of affection was not, however, to be cheated by the compelled wreathing of that pale and trembling lip; and it was with great alarm that Mortimer inquired into the cause of so violent an emotion.

"Alas, Frederic;" replied Miss Delamere, as she averted her face, and breathed a sigh which appeared to heave a weight of woe from her oppressed bosom; "No wonder that I am wretched, when I am called upon to communicate to you that which will, in all probability, separate us for ever."

"What can you mean, Sybil?" was the anxious retort of the bewildered Mortimer; "surely your anonymous persecutor has not dared again to invade your peace? Speak, I entreat of you; and leave me, now at least, free to unmask the cowardly assassin, who is amusing his foul leisure by undermining our happiness."

Sybil shook her head, and remained silent.

"If the law can reach him"—pursued Mortimer indignantly.

"Fate, not malice, is our present enemy;" said Miss Delamere with a second sigh; "There is no foe to combat, no adversary to overcome. I believed that all my trials were at last over: that all my visions were about to be realized; but I deceived myself. Strong in your affection, I had forgotten that chance and change are the governing principles of this life; and I have been suddenly awakened from my delusion. While I was dreaming in fancied security of a future of peace and love, insured by your affection, destiny was at work to falsify all my previsions. Perhaps I was not worthy of so much happiness; in any case the illusion is dispelled, like many by which it was preceded. I appear, and have long appeared, to live in a world of shadows: I no sooner seek to grasp them than they elude my touch. You know not,—may you never know!—the trials through which I have passed, gaily as I may seem to defy fate; but for this last blow I confess that I was totally unprepared!"

"Sybil, you torture me!"

"For your sake and for my own, I will at once speak plainly;" said Miss Delamere, while her fingers wandered, as if unconsciously, among the luxuriant hair of her listener, and parted the heavy curls from his hot and throbbing forehead. "Our

contemplated union is at an end. We may, we *must* be, still dear to each other, Frederic; but we can be no more than friends. The property of my father was placed in the hands of trustees, one of whom has absconded, carrying with him all the funds upon which my mother and myself were dependent for our support. The other was a mere cypher, from whom nothing can be recovered, nothing hoped. Like ourselves, he entrusted all to his colleague; and, like ourselves, he is also a heavy loser; but he has other resources—we have none. Utterly in his power, through the confidence of my misguided father, and the faith reposed in him by his co-trustee, his evasion is our utter ruin; and all this—the blight of two lives, and the wreck of one fabric of happiness such as the world has seldom ever dreamed of, has been conveyed to me on a single page—in a few formal lines of condolence and information. Of myself I dare not speak. It is only in my own heart that I am conscious of the amount of suffering which I am called upon singly to endure.”

And as she ceased speaking, the head of Sybil sank upon the shoulder of her lover, and he felt the shudder which passed over her whole frame.

“And is this all?” asked Mortimer, as he clasped her to his heart. “Is this the mighty and insur-

mountable obstacle which is to sever us? Surely, Sybil, you wrong me by such a doubt, and you have never understood the nature of my love. Did you for a moment suspect that I valued you for your power of adding to my wealth, or for anything save your own dear self? How little do you yet understand a passion like mine! Learn to know me better; and to feel that I rather rejoice at this sudden reverse of fortune which makes you more entirely my own. Are you mourning over your loss of affluence? Have I not enough for both of us? What have you lost? Will not our home be that of your mother, and am I not rich enough to maintain you in the comfort and opulence to which you have been accustomed? Fie upon you, Sybil; you have never yet understood me. Now, indeed, we shall be everything to each other; you will be all my own; all your happiness will be in my keeping, and, believe me, I will prove worthy of the trust. Our mutual affection will never be endangered by a diversity of interests; but, doubly united by affection and by marriage, we shall have but one heart and one soul. Oh, my beloved Sybil!" he added passionately; "this calamity alone was needed to show you all the extent of my attachment; and far from deprecating its occurrence, I welcome it as

the blessed means of proving to you the sincerity of an affection which can end only with my life. Henceforward I shall remember that I won you when you were wealthy and independent, and when I could offer you no equivalent for the position which you occupied save a devoted heart. There will be no drawback to my happiness in the suspicion that you loved me for the paltry possessions which I inherited from my ancestors; while I shall feel with honest pride that I am the source of all your future enjoyments; and you cannot guess the luxury of such a conviction; while you, on your side, will now be equally assured that I loved you only for yourself, undazzled by the factitious splendour in which you have hitherto moved, as in an atmosphere peculiarly your own. Say, dearest, is it not well worth while to lose something of the world's wealth to secure so proud a feeling?"

"But I am literally a beggar, Frederic; these empty gauds by which I am now surrounded, constitute my whole fortune, and my mother's."

"And we could have dispensed even with these, dear Sybil;" replied Mortimer, as he strained her to his heart; "Such love as ours is independent of the vanities of society. Now, indeed, I feel that I have a worthy stake in the world; that I am no

longer a mere unit in the countless crowd of my fellow-men ; but a responsible and important member of society, with others dependent upon me for support and happiness. You shall see how this conviction will operate upon my hitherto listless character ; you shall learn how deeply I feel the holiness of my earthly mission ; and you shall do me justice."

Was the renewed shudder which passed through the veins of Miss Delamere one of compunction, as she listened to this impassioned reply ? Who shall say ! She had prepared herself to exert all her powers of fascination, all her arts of coquetry ; but the fervent honesty of purpose by which she had been met negatived all her plans. The victim was self-bound to the horns of the altar.

"Frederic;" she at length murmured fondly ; "I scarcely know how to thank you. *You*, indeed, then love me for myself. *You* are above the vicissitudes of fortune ; and it is at last my happy fate to be really valued for my own sake. Oh, did you know, could you guess, how thoroughly you have, by this noble self-abnegation, redeemed all human nature in my eyes, I think that you would not regret the sacrifice which you are making, great as it is. You know not what I have suffered since the arrival of that fatal letter. My reflections

were horrible ! Warned by the past, I did not dare to hope that even your affection—and believe me, when I declare that I nevertheless did justice to its sincerity—I did not dare to hope that it would withstand such an ordeal. You had sought me when I was surrounded by all the comforts, and by many of the luxuries of life ; and I have been taught bitterly to feel how much a mere common character is influenced by such accessories. Existing in a paradise of hope, cradled in the most delightful visions, living only in the prospect of a future fraught with love and happiness, the terrible intelligence of ruin seemed at once to sever me from everything which I had learnt to prize, and to doom me to life-long wretchedness. Oh, I have indeed felt within the last few hours how short a step it may be from joy to despair ; and how, while we possess the one, we should prepare ourselves against the tortures of the other !”

“ My poor Sybil !”

“ Yes, pity me, Frederic, pity me ; for I have lived a year of torture since yesterday. But I will dwell upon this miserable subject no longer. You love me ; and I have now nothing to regret, nothing to apprehend. You are my world ; and although I shall give myself to you far otherwise than I hoped, I have no fear that your affection

will be diminished by my misfortunes. Nay, I could almost forget the humiliation of my own pride, to thank destiny for a blow which has elevated me in my own eyes, since it has failed to lessen me in yours."

"It is not in the power of fate to do so;" replied Mortimer earnestly; "I have enough for both of us, and therefore let not the hateful consideration of money occupy your thoughts for an instant. It can be no obstacle to our happiness. I can restore to you the opulence which you have lost, and maintain you in the station to which you have been accustomed. You shall have nothing to regret. In your mother I shall find a new parent, and in yourself possess all that I can covet in this life. Do not, therefore, wrong my affection by grieving over an inevitable misfortune, but rather tell me when you will give me a legal right to repair it."

A thick and stifling sob rose to the throat of Miss Delamere. Even she, callous and selfish as she was, was nevertheless overcome for an instant, and felt abashed before the dupe whom she had made. But the pang of compunction passed as rapidly as it had risen; the game was now, indeed, in her hands; and the recompense of all her efforts within her very grasp. Her tears fell warm and

fast upon the hands which clasped her own ; but as their impulse remained unsuspected, this womanly gushing out of sensibility only endeared her the more to the infatuated Mortimer.

“ All shall be as you will ;” she whispered, as she passed her hands across her eyes, and then swept back the clustering curls which had half veiled her countenance ; “ All—for henceforth I can have no will, no hope but yours.”

“ And you will promise to weep no more, my best beloved ?”

Sybil shook her head with a faint smile.

“ Let this be your first act of wifely obedience ;” said Mortimer fondly ; “ for it is impossible to talk of the future while I see you steeped in tears. And now let us be more just to ourselves than we have hitherto been, since the world seems inclined to treat us roughly, and to leave us to be the architects of our own happiness. I give you a fortnight, Sybil ; a whole fortnight, to prepare for the awful event which we have deferred too long already. Nay, no disclaimers ; I feel inclined to be arbitrary, and I will not concede another day, not another hour. You see, therefore, that you have no time for regrets.”

“ But I have much to arrange ; much to retrench.”

“ We will do all in good time ; but for the

present, we must have no retrenchment, no alteration. Your mother will need to be surrounded by familiar objects, and to indulge her usual habits, during your absence. In losing you she will already have lost too much. Leave The Grange, therefore, without one change which may imply that you abandon it for ever. Would that we could also leave Mrs. Delamere in happy ignorance of what has occurred, but that is, I fear, impossible!"

"As yet;" faltered Sybil; "she knows nothing; for I confess that I did not dare to acquaint her with the truth, while there existed a probability that I should yet have more and darker news to tell; nor indeed, even had I wished to do so, could I have commanded sufficient self-possession to render such a tale intelligible."

And herein, at least, Sybil was partially sincere, for Mrs. Delamere was ignorant of the new expedient contemplated by her daughter, and could not consequently have comprehended the condolences of Mortimer had he deemed it fitting to offer them; but as such was far from his intention, Sybil gladly saw herself freed from this last peril, and acquiesced in the suggestion that no suspicion of her heavy trial should be engendered in the mind of the unhappy lady; promising, with one of her most eloquent and winning smiles, that all

her discourse with her mother should turn upon her approaching marriage, and the bridal arrangements necessary to its speedy completion ; while so gentle did she show herself, and so impassioned in her expressions of gratitude and affection, that the deluded Mortimer at length departed from The Grange, convinced that hitherto his had been a barren and a vain existence, and that now only he was about indeed to live.

How thoroughly do human beings allow themselves to be cheated by false-seeming ! As the floating corse borne onward by the current, although it still wears the semblance of mortality, and possesses a factitious motion due to the action of the waves upon which it rides, is not the less a corse, sustained upon the surface by its own innate corruption, and incapable of voluntary movement ; so is the vice which drapes itself in graceful sophistries equally foul, although it craftily retain the likeness of social convention. The figure is perhaps a strong one, but not the less appropriate ; for the decay has been gradual and certain in both cases, and the mockery, both physical and moral, alike hollow and false.

Alas, for Sybil Delamere ! The child of love and prayer, how had she fallen from her high eminence ! By how many slow and almost imper-

ceptible steps had she been advancing on her downward path! How little do women, while venturing upon their first act of levity, anticipate the remorse and wretchedness to which they are about to subject their after-life, and in what a tissue of duplicity and untruth they are about to involve their future actions; striving in vain, moreover, to believe that a trifling dereliction from duty and high principle cannot condemn them, even while they are compelled to feel that it indeed does so, in the very mystery by which it is necessary to shroud it; and above all, in the consciousness that they have become less pure in their own eyes!

And then—after that first step—what an uncoiling of the silver cord of purity and peace is essential to guide them through the labyrinth of their faults and follies, until at length, the bright and precious help exhausted, they have to toil alone and unaided even to the close of their dark, and false, and unloved career!

Far, very far, had Sybil progressed in this bad pilgrimage. Cunning as the serpent, she was also as beautiful; but if, like the reptile, she had been compelled to cast the glittering skin which veiled her moral deformity, how would those who loved her now have shrunk from her fatal fascinations!

But the glory of loveliness still beamed about her; and Mortimer was destined to be its victim.

CHAPTER XI.

IN the society of the family at the Manor-house Gertrude had found a resource and a comparative happiness, for which she was deeply grateful. Contrary to her anticipations also, Miss Warrington, while declining the somewhat languid overtures of Mrs. Armstrong on her own account, and remaining firm in her determination not to cross any threshold in the character of a guest, offered no opposition to a friendship which she could not conceal from herself might ultimately become of essential service to her almost friendless niece; and thus, as the virtues and accomplishments of the orphan developed themselves to her new acquaintance, the intercourse between the families became more intimate; the passion of the young heir continuing unguessed at alike by its object, and those around them.

To Gertrude herself, the future presented no vision of affection. She believed her heart to have been exhausted in the past; and even when her thoughts rested on Mary Armstrong, and he

who soon afterwards became her declared suitor, she wove no web of fancy for herself, in which she too was to be loved and won.

The ceaseless attentions of Ernest Armstrong, the more welcome perhaps that they were unobtrusive, and only to be estimated by their perseverance, solaced her pride and soothed her feelings; but she attached to them no importance whatever, considering them as the mere kindly demonstrations of an amiable nature, intended to beguile her into a temporary forgetfulness of her desolate position. And in this spirit alone did she receive and respond to his anxious and earnest devotion; grateful that she was no longer able to say in her solitude, as she had once said, that she had ceased to be an object of interest to any, and was destined to tread the path of life without one kindly hand to thrust aside the briars with which it was overgrown.

But beyond this point the thoughts or feelings of Gertrude never wandered; the image of her cousin was still enshrined in her heart of hearts. To her he was faultless as in those early years when, with her head pillowed upon the knees of her loving aunt, she listened to a thousand oft-told, but never unwelcome, legends of his infancy and boyhood; and there were yet moments when

a weight of bitter regret settled upon her spirit, beneath which she felt shrunk and prostrate. It is true that she strove against a weakness which revolted her own reason; but these dark periods of memory affected alike her health and her temperament, and brought many a cloud across the horizon of her existence. Sometimes, in order to emancipate herself from a moral thrall at once painful and unavailing, she endeavoured to recall all the sufferings to which the vacillation of Mortimer had exposed her; all the circumstances of which she had been made the victim; all the incidents wherein her pride had been wounded, or her hopes slighted. But the heart has a logic of its own; and the culprit was arraigned at the bar of her partial judgment only to be acquitted.

Yet still she struggled against a weakness which would ere long, should Mortimer indeed become the husband of Miss Delamere, degenerate into sin. But would he do so? was the ever-recurring interrogatory which, as this thought arose, she addressed to her eager and swelling heart. Had not her dying aunt linked the hand of Frederic with her own?—Had she not expired in the belief that her last prayer was to be accomplished? Did she not know how devotedly he had once loved the gentle mother whose every

thought was for him? And could it be that a stranger, and the love of a stranger ——

At that phase of the silent argument, however, Gertrude paused to weep. She remembered the fascinations of that stranger, and the enthusiastic character of her cousin. No, no; there was no hope. Sybil was the star of Frederic: the “bright, particular star,” fated to rule his destiny. She had come, none knew whence or why, to accomplish her mysterious mission; she had come, and conquered; and her own duty was simply to submit.

Such was the state of Gertrude’s mind, when, as she was one morning busily engaged in giving the last touches to a masterly sketch which she had made of Bletchley church for Eleanor Armstrong, while Miss Warrington was occupied with the daily paper, the solitary luxury in which she indulged, she was startled by an exclamation from the old lady, which was immediately followed by her reading aloud the paragraph by which it had been called forth.

“Listen, Gertrude;” she said, in that accent of quiet complacency in which elderly persons are wont to indulge while promulgating any species of news; “‘On Tuesday morning, at the parish church of Westrum, by the Rev. James Ingatesby,

Frederic Mortimer, Esq., of Westrum House, to Sybil, only daughter of the late William Delamere, Esq.' So your cousin is married, you see; and married without having the civility to apprise you of it beforehand."

But Gertrude made no reply. The pencil dropped from her hand, and it was only by a fearful effort that she preserved herself from fainting. All was then, indeed, over. The prayers of her dying aunt, the hopes of long years, her silent but deep affection,—all had alike failed. As she saw herself definitively and for ever separated from her cousin, the love which she had done so much to overcome welled up afresh, and she felt as though she had just listened to her death-warrant.

It was in vain that she sought to disguise her emotion. Pale, panting, and bewildered, she gazed hopelessly around her, but every object appeared to swim before her eyes; she tried to think, but a mist was over her spirit, and she could not combine the images which were floating across her brain.

Her aunt again addressed her, in all probability upon the same subject, but although she heard the voice she could not connect any meaning with the sound; and, at length, conscious that she could

not much longer support the constraint under which she was then suffering, she murmured a few disjointed and almost inaudible words, and tottered from the apartment.

When the dinner was announced Gertrude was still in her room, where she was found by the servant who went to summon her, stretched lifeless upon the bed.

Painful, very painful, were the solitary hours which she spent in that narrow and cheerless chamber; only the less wretched, however, that they *were* solitary. There she had leisure to contemplate all the circumstances of her position, to weep over the memories of the past, and to shudder at the dreariness of the future. How had she deceived herself, in believing that she had almost succeeded in overcoming her affection—How bitterly was she taught to feel that there is a depth in the human heart which, once stirred, is long, very long, ere its waters again subside !

Encouraged for years by her fond but incautious aunt to believe that she was the destined wife of her cousin, she had cherished the illusion until even reason had failed to convince her that it was dispersed; and it had required no less than its present final confirmation to enable her to comprehend the truth. Vainly had she imagined that

she was prepared to hear of his marriage, and to reconcile herself to think of him henceforward only as the husband of another.

Gertrude was merely tasting the bitter experience of a fact which all of us have, at some time in our lives, been fated to acknowledge; that, however we may deem ourselves prepared for an impending evil, and however we may have argued ourselves beforehand into befitting resignation, its advent usually finds us as powerless and as prostrate as though it had been utterly unforeseen.

Poor girl! the strongest link in her existence had been rudely and abruptly rent asunder. It was Frederic who was the one bond between her and the past; and now she must remember him, and love him only as the husband of Sybil; of that Sybil who had come between her and happiness, and rendered her an outcast from the home of her youth. To her Frederic could be nothing now; nothing save a sad memory. All his thoughts, all his cares, all his tenderness, must henceforth be devoted to the woman whom he had taken to his heart. She only had now the right to watch over him in sickness, to weep with him in sorrow, and to soothe him in disappointment. And how would she fulfil her holy mission?

“Oh, well, well!” murmured Gertrude to her-

self, as the question rose in her pure heart; "she *must* do so, for Frederic loves her!"

And then her own hot tears rained down to feel that another had usurped the blessed duties which she would have performed so zealously. She thought not of sharing the brilliant fortune of her cousin, of indulging in the luxuries which it would command, or of claiming her share in the sunny hours of his existence; she dwelt only upon *home*, upon the chances and changes which might come even to him, and on those moments when the tenderness of a wife transcends all other consolations.

Vainly, however, did she dwell upon these thoughts: the conviction soon followed, that for her no such hallowed duty was destined, but that Frederic was lost to her for ever; nor could she now, without guilt, even encourage a wish that it were otherwise. Had she been told a week, only a week beforehand, that his marriage was irrevocably decided, she believed that she could have schooled both her heart and her reason into submission. Had he written her a few lines of kindness and affection, she believed that she could have reconciled herself to what he would then have once more assured her was to him an earnest of happiness: but to learn that all was over through the

cold medium of a public print, to feel that she had been forgotten while her whole heart was full of his image; this it was, as she fancied, which made the blow so heavy to be borne: and so she tried to cheat herself into the belief that she loved him less, even while she felt that she could not deceive herself.

No, struggle as she might with her own weakness, she could not be so deceived. She, indeed, prayed for his happiness, but still not for his happiness *with another*. The desire of possessing the affections of the being whom we love is one of the strongest feelings implanted in the bosom of humanity.

Even with the most pure and perfect attachment, there mingles more selfishness than we are willing to acknowledge: we love its objects not only for *their* sakes but for our *own*; the most heroic devotion fails to divest us of this egotism; in serving, soothing, and saving those we love, we are also protecting our own interests; which, by an exclusive affection, we have bound up so intimately with theirs, that we can no longer separate them; cleave the trunk, and the branches wither.

To this it may be answered, that there have been instances in which a total self-abnegation has

been exhibited; and where, in order to secure the happiness of one party, the other has resigned all claim to an affection which had once been the day-spring of existence. But who has read the heart which so forswore itself? Who has witnessed the struggle of a declining passion, paling under the conviction that this sacrifice was—mutely, perhaps, and reluctantly, but still that this sacrifice was,—covertly desired of them? Who has seen the blood-drops start from the brow, and the damps of death bead upon the clammy palms clasped together in despair? Who has watched the slow breaking of the wounded heart which resigned its treasure, not in obedience to its own impulses, but beneath the influence of a bitter pride, which, when it had given ALL, would not suffer that *all* to be tolerated where it should have been prized? And who, we ask finally, has followed that blighted and withered victim to its closing hour, without feeling convinced that “the silver cord was loosened, and the golden bowl was broken,” which had knit and filled the two natures thus unnaturally severed, before the act of self-abnegation was accomplished. The wounded hart flies to the thicket to die: the outraged and disappointed spirit plucks out its own spear.

Let the world read matters as it will—and “he who runs may read”—there is yet a volume which it cannot unclothe in its reckless haste and egotism, without pausing longer than it is prone to do, ere it can hope to comprehend its pages—the weary but glorious volume of the human heart; weary, because it holds so much of woe—glorious, because it contains so much of hope.

CHAPTER XII.

OH, that first withering of the young and devoted heart, how utter, how irremediable it appears! Every link of hope and memory alike snapped at once; the past a blight, the present a pang, and the future a blank! Life has indeed deeper and deadlier miseries in store, but none so keen, none so overwhelming, none so bitter,—the waters of Marah sear the soul over which they flow, and the trace of their passage is never blotted out! Time and change are alike powerless to renew the freshness which they have marred.

The heart may, after a while, take another impress; it does, it must; for the wear of the world hardens the spent fire to lava, and new idols will be wrought out of the wreck of the first destruction; but it is no longer the same worship. The shrine has been desecrated, the veil of the sanctuary rent; and where all was once uncalculating trust and tenderness, have grown up doubt and dread—those noisome weeds which stagnate upon the pool of egotism, and foul the waters beneath.

Self struggles to the surface; self, which had hitherto remained dormant, and folded in the angel coil of peace and joy: and no sooner claims its place than it mingles palpably in the after-devotion over which it originally poured forth all its energies upon its object without one ungenerous reservation.

Life! what is the luxury of thy banquet when this one cup has been drained and thrown aside? Ambition waves aloft its golden vessels, wealth tips its goblets with jewels, pleasure wreathes its tankard with roses, and sensuality crushes into its capacious bowl the juice of the purple grape until it overflows; but the vase which was garlanded with hope, lighted by sunshine, and hallowed by the heart's best and holiest affections, can be fitly replaced by none of these: only one such draught can be ever drained; and when that one has been dashed with the bitterness of disappointment, the tide of existence may indeed moisten the lip, but it can never again warm the heart. The bland outgushing of the spirit's spring has hopelessly wasted its pure current on the desert-sands.

Too proud, nevertheless, to yield to the influence of a neglected passion, Gertrude struggled resolutely against the wretchedness which swelled her young and desolate heart almost to bursting.

She forgave Sybil. How could she do otherwise when she remembered that she was now the wife of Frederic? But she could not bless the arrow by which she had been stricken. Again and again she read the solitary letter with which her forgetful cousin had cheered her exile; and she could not mistake the implied proposal that she should again seek a home beneath his roof. But when? Alas, she understood it now! When Sybil should be installed in the place of the beloved aunt who had made that home a paradise—when Sybil should head the board, and fill the chair which had once been hers—when another voice should command, and another will control, where she had swayed so gentle a rule that obedience seemed but a dearer privilege. No, no: it could not be. Gertrude looked round her modest chamber, and breathed out a low and fervent thanksgiving that she had another and a calmer place of refuge.

Perhaps it was well for her that she had to strive also against the suspicions of her anxious hostess; whose blunted sensibilities, although they were unequal to sympathise with what she regarded as the mere nervous absurdities of fanciful and pampered young people, were not, however, sufficiently obtuse to deaden the curiosity which led her to seek an immediate cause for their develop-

ment; and thus Gertrude soon discovered the necessity of controlling her feelings in the presence of her aunt, and of checking the tears which at intervals rose to her burning eye-balls. And the task was a hard and a bitter one; for, like many other well-meaning but ill-judging persons, Miss Warrington no sooner heard the apothecary who had been called in, declare that his patient was simply suffering from moral depression and debility, and required only amusement unattended with exertion to restore her to health, than she installed herself daily for hours in the sick-room, where, in default of other subjects of conversation, she descanted perpetually on the very themes which the poor girl would fain have avoided; and that with a voluble pertinacity which rendered their exhaustion hopeless.

“It is fortunate, however, Mr. Pilbeam; very fortunate;” she said upon one occasion, as the apothecary seated himself by the bed-side, and strove to rally the spirits of Gertrude by an assurance that in a short time she would be enabled to leave her room; “very fortunate, indeed, that there is really no danger; for I should scarcely have known how to act, had you given me cause to apprehend the contrary. A month, or I may say only a week ago, I could have

written to apprise her cousin, who is her nearest relation—for I am but her great-aunt, and should, consequently, have declined all responsibility in such a case; but at this moment I don't know where to find him, as he is just married, and is probably on his wedding-tour. In my time people were satisfied to remain at home on such occasions to feast their tenantry, and keep open house; but now they consider it correct to run away from their friends, as though they had done something that they were ashamed of."

"*Tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis, eh?*" interposed the apothecary sententiously, with a condescending smile.

Miss Warrington was silenced for a moment, and at once bewildered and displeased; but she soon recovered herself, and resumed,—

"Such being the case, we do not know where to address him. However, as Gertrude is better, we can afford to wait until he is again at Westrum. As for myself, I confess that I felt little or no alarm at her illness; for on the day of her arrival here, I remarked to Hannah that I did not believe she had an ounce of blood in her veins; and she even now looks better than when she first came to Bletchley."

"You may be quite easy upon the subject, my

dear madam ; in a few days we shall have Miss Mortimer in the drawing-room. But we must be careful to protect her from all unnecessary excitement, as her nerves are evidently very susceptible."

" You would rather, perhaps, that she should not yet see the Miss Armstrongs, who have called every day, and are half offended that I have not allowed them to come up stairs ?"

" On the contrary, my dear lady ; on the contrary ;" briskly exclaimed Mr. Pilbeam, who would rather have risked a relapse in his patient than the chance of displeasing the family at the Manor-house ; " their visit can only be beneficial to Miss Mortimer, as I understand that they have already become very intimate. A great privilege that for the young lady, my dear madam ; a very great privilege, and not extended beyond herself as regards this immediate neighbourhood. You gave your interest to ' Armstrong and Independence,' of course, Miss Warrington ?"

" I gave it to no one ;" was the tart reply, as the clenched fingers of his interlocutor became blenched by the violence with which they were interlaced.

" No—eh ? Well, you surprise me !" was the composed rejoinder. " All Bletchley took it for granted that you had supported him. However, it seems that he has succeeded without you, for he

is *in*, I hear. Some rumour, to be sure, of bribery and that kind of thing, but it is of course all local gossip; and as I often say to Mrs. Pilbeam, when she occasionally reports these small matters over our tea-table, *tempus omnia revelat*—at all events, I never give an opinion; no professional man should, eh?”

There was no reply.

“And now, my dear madam, I will take my leave;” said the dapper little apothecary, resuming his hat and cane; “and I trust that, by the termination of the honeymoon, my fair patient will be in a fit condition to pay her bridal visit. Nothing like change of scene and cheerful society in such a case; eh, my dear Miss Mortimer? What say you to my prescription?”

Gertrude said nothing. Her mightiest effort at endurance and self-control would only enable her to torture her faded lips into a ghastly smile, as she took the hand which he tendered on his departure, ere she turned her weary and aching head upon her pillow, and strove to escape at once from the light of day and the sound of human voices.

But no such escape was to be hers. Miss Warrington, excited by her own unusual activity, and deeply offended by what she considered as an undue presumption on the part of Mr. Pilbeam,

whom she detested both for his babble and his bill, no sooner heard the street door close behind him than she continued to vent her hoarded ill-humour upon Mortimer; and poor Gertrude was compelled to endure all the outpouring of her wrath.

“The accidental allusion to your cousin’s marriage, my dear;” she resumed, as she installed her perpendicular person, according to her own idea of comfort, in the large arm-chair just vacated by the diligent apothecary; “reminds me—I say nothing of myself: I am an old woman, and the days are past when it was considered necessary to show any regard to the feelings of such useless individuals as old women, when they chance to be poor—but it reminds me, as I was about to say, that Mr. Mortimer has treated you with great disrespect, in not writing to inform you of his intended marriage. He might be very much engaged; I dare say he was; people generally are, I believe, at such times; but still half-an-hour is no great matter, and half-an-hour might always be spared for such a purpose. I confess that I feel very indignant at so singular and marked a slight; for it is a slight, Gertrude, look at it as you will; you may be poor, but you are as well-born and as well-bred as himself, and he has no right to look down upon you.”

"Indeed, my dear aunt, you mistake him;" faltered the poor girl, tortured to the very soul; "Frederic is incapable of such a feeling."

"I am glad to hear it;" replied the old lady, in that provoking tone which implies a resolute opposition of sentiment; "very glad, for it would degrade him, not you. But, be this as it may, his conduct has been very extraordinary. He should have remembered that his parents had no right to educate and rear you like a duchess only to leave you to starve at last."

"Spare me, I entreat of you;" exclaimed Gertrude piteously: "Did you understand the nature of Frederic, you would feel how impossible it was for him to act otherwise than he has done!"

"Well, my dear child, do not agitate yourself;" replied the old lady, somewhat alarmed by the violence of her emotion: "we will say no more upon the subject. I understand it all now—the lady was jealous of your pretty face; and perhaps she was right. But keep up your spirits, and that pretty face may stand your friend yet."

Oh, are not these the trifles which make life difficult to bear,—these puny, pigmy miseries, which, like the knife of a surgeon, rend open again and again the wound which might have healed before its appointed time? To the first

evil they are as nothing in proportion ; and yet, how many who struggle manfully against the crushing fall of the mighty mass, and strive, languidly perhaps and wearily, but still resolutely, to save some fragment from the wreck, are disheartened and bruised anew by the perpetual droppings of the loosened pebbles ! How justly has it been said that—

“ 'Tis trifles make the sum of human things ! ”

and yet, upon those trifles is hinged the whole peace of our existence.

Day after day, almost hour after hour, did these corroding conversations occur, until Gertrude, who would fain have herself forgotten all beyond the narrow circle of her present home, more than once found herself upon the very point of confiding to Miss Warrington the bitter, but still cherished secret of the past, in order to silence her for ever. More than once did the confession tremble on her tongue ; but as she raised her eyes to the rigid and passionless countenance, and then dropped them upon the compressed and bony fingers before her, the blood rushed back upon her heart, and she continued to endure in silence.

Not even the persevering affection of the amiable inmates of the Manor-house could coun-

teract the evil effect of this constant demand upon her fortitude. She gradually withered, until even Mr. Pilbeam himself began to apprehend that the disease which he had at first treated so lightly, was in fact too deep-seated to be overcome; and, thus impressed, he ventured to suggest to Miss Warrington the necessity of an immediate change of scene. Better, as he shrewdly and philosophically decided in his own mind, if she must die,—and die he had by this time become convinced she would—that it should be anywhere rather than under his hands.

It was easy to suggest such an arrangement; and, in former years, it would have been equally easy for the orphan to have acquiesced in it at once; but now she instantly negatived the proposition; for she had begun to comprehend the nature of that poverty which so pertinaciously intrudes its gaunt hand, close-clenched, before the moral vision of the needy, and compels them to feel their helplessness.

Happily, however, Providence had watched over the gentle and uncomplaining victim of misfortune,—that blessed Providence which is by the thoughtless mis-called chance, or fate, or accident; but which still beautifully and harmoniously pursues its holy way, thwarting the previsions of

the evil-minded, and smoothing the rugged path of the stricken and the feeble.

It was but on the morrow after the medical fiat had gone forth, that Mary and Eleanor Armstrong once more arrived at the modest dwelling of Miss Warrington, laden, as was their custom, with fruit and flowers; but also, on this occasion, radiant with delight. Mr. Pilbeam had just left the Manor-house, where, in answer to the earnest inquiries of the Squire for his fair favourite, he had reiterated his opinion of the necessity of an immediate change of air and scene; and they had come as ambassadors from their mother to claim the society of Gertrude for a few weeks.

The cheeks and brow of the sick girl flushed with happiness for a moment, but in the next instant the glow faded, and her heart sank. She felt that she would rather be left free to indulge her sorrow, than compelled to make a renewed effort for existence. She was perishing then, she knew, slowly but surely; and could she only have escaped the unintentional persecutions of her aunt, she would have rejoiced to linger out her remaining days in peace and solitude, and gradually to emancipate herself from every earthly affection.

It is certain that there is a strange fascination

in the idea of death to the young who are subdued by any lingering sorrow. The stronger and sterner interests which link man to the world in riper age are still unknown to them. That second life, if so it may be termed, which, like Minerva, springs in all its power from the brain, and teaches its due, or at least enforced, subordination to the heart, has not yet commenced. The chain of roses alone has withered, and it is sweet and soothing to hope to perish with them; while, by a strange contradiction, it is only when the links of iron have been forged, and their weight is felt, that the shackled captive revolts against release, and clings to his rusted fetters.

Under this impression of hopelessness, Gertrude urged the utter impossibility of contending, in her present state of weakness, against the stir and bustle of an establishment like that of the Manor-house at a period so exciting as the close of a successfully-contested election; but her objection was instantly met by the assurance that all the local duties of hospitality contingent upon that success had been already fulfilled, and that early on the morrow both Mr. Armstrong and his son would depart for town.

“Thus, you see, my dear frightened Gertrude;” said Eleanor persuasively; “that you will be as

quiet with us as in your own tranquil home ; for our party will consist only of my mother and ourselves, and Mr. Somerville ; who, for some reason which Mary can perhaps explain, appears at the present moment to have a decided disinclination to visit London. As for Ernest, he too, from some unaccountable cause, seemed this morning to share the sentiment of his friend ; but he could not, of course, be excused ; so go he must, and will ; but he bade me not forget to say that it was he who gathered the grapes, and selected the flowers which we have brought ; in order that you might be assured how truly he sympathises with the rest of his family in their anxiety for your recovery. So now we have only to obtain the consent of our kind Miss Warrington to this little arrangement, and to carry you off to-morrow so soon as we have taken leave of papa."

It was impossible to resist the earnest kindness of such an invitation ; and, accordingly, on the following evening Gertrude found herself established under the hospitable roof of the Armstrongs, and surrounded by the most affectionate attentions. The effect of so genial a change alike upon her health and spirits was great and rapid ; and if her heart was occasionally wrung by the spectacle of Mary's radiant happiness, as she contrasted it

with her own forlorn condition, she found support and comfort in the knowledge, that her struggles were unguessed at by those about her; and exerted herself to secure her secret so successfully that there were even moments in which she ceased to feel its weight.

Thus three weeks passed over; and Mr. Pilbeam himself began to feel that his visits were becoming supererogatory, as he saw an occasional bloom once more suffuse the pale cheek of his beautiful patient, and a light dance in her eye; but like Mrs. Armstrong, he stringently objected to her return home until her health should be more unequivocally restored; and Gertrude, although she still endeavoured to discover a thousand reasons for terminating her visit, was in reality happy to find that they were all overruled in turn. To Eleanor she had become almost essential; for the whole time and attention of Mary were engrossed by Somerville, who had proved so efficient an auxiliary during the election, that he had won the heart of the Squire as well as that of his daughter; and thus the two younger girls were seldom separated, and all the various attainments of the orphan were in time discovered and estimated by her amiable but less gifted friend. Arm in arm they wandered through the richly-wooded

grounds of the Manor-house, or loitered upon the border of the graceful little stream which laved their boundaries; and Eleanor learned to love and to appreciate a host of natural beauties upon which she had previously looked almost with indifference.

There is always a world of poetry lying dormant in the breast of a young pure girl, which it requires some extraneous circumstances to develope; and so was it with the friend of Gertrude, who soon began to marvel that she could so long have remained careless, if not insensible, to the loveliness of all about her.

"Why is it, Gertrude;" she asked; "that I never felt thus before?—That I never, until I knew you, could appreciate these marvellous mysteries of nature? I loved the country, but only for my own sake; only because I breathed a purer air, and enjoyed more liberty than in town; that I delighted to pluck the flowers, and to bask in the sunshine, and to indulge in the merely material pleasures, which are impossible to a London life. It now seems inexplicable to me that I should have been so blind."

"And yet it is not so;" replied the orphan with a sad smile; "It is only those who have suffered, or who have looked upon suffering, who

can make companionship with nature; who can hear voices in the woods, and read hope in the glorious spectacle of a sun-lighted sky. Look you, Eleanor;" she added with emotion, as they entered a small garden-pavilion overhung with trailing-plants, and seated themselves upon its rustic bench: "Look only here. Do you mark how these lovely but frail Banksian roses wreath themselves fondly about the lattice-work which they almost conceal: so is the world garlanded with hopes as bright and as unenduring; and yet we would not rend away those scented blossoms, because we know that in a few hours they must fade; neither would we forego those hopes, although we know that they may end in disappointment. Nay more; we do not uproot the tree when its bloom is scattered, for we await the season which shall renew its blossoming—while, with the human heart, Eleanor; with the human heart, there is no second harvest, although it still beats on, as if in disdain of the blighted past."

"Gertrude, you are wrong to dwell upon such thoughts. You see that I can weep with you, but you are still to blame. You have, indeed, lost the friends of your childhood, but you will, you must, make many, many more."

“Forgive me;” said the orphan with a slight shudder: “at least it is not to you, to whom I owe so much of happiness, that I should talk thus. But you know not, Eleanor,—and may you never know!—how hard it is to lose all—all; and to begin your life anew, without one tie of kindred or of kindness.”

“Our conversation has taken a sad turn;” interposed Eleanor, hastily wiping her eyes; “and you are not so wise a monitress as usual. Lesson me no more lessons to-day, fair Mistress Gertrude, but rather let me twine this lovely branch of roses in your pale hair. There, is it not glorious? Five sister-blooms in one rich cluster! And now, to read you another and a more cheerful homily than your own, I will tell you that they look like the blossoms of a newer and a fresher hope, flowering above the cold memories of other joys.”

And as she concluded her graceful task, she once more drew the arm of her friend within her own, and they quitted the pavilion.

An unusual stir as they approached the house prepared them for some arrival; and they had scarcely entered the hall, when Eleanor was in her brother's arms; but he held her there only for an instant ere he turned to greet her companion.

Beautiful as she looked, however, as she stood before him with extended hand and smiling lip, her simple white dress displaying to advantage all the symmetry of her frail but graceful figure, her bonnet in her hand, and her luxuriant hair still garlanded with the flowers which Eleanor had twined about it, the young man could not suppress a start as his eye fell upon her. The expression of her face was so languid, the outline of her always delicate features so much sharpened, and her whole appearance so strongly indicative of suffering, that he felt a pang at his heart, and a vague terror, which he dared not trust himself to define.

For the first time, a suspicion that Gertrude was the prey of some secret sorrow, against which she had struggled until her strength had failed beneath the conflict, pressed upon his spirit; and, as the idea grew in strength, despite all his efforts to suppress it, he began to comprehend the extent of his feeling towards her. What would he not have given at that moment to have possessed the power of reading her heart, and of soothing her sorrows, be they what they might; but this he knew to be impossible; and thus he spoke to her only of her sickness, of her recovery, and of his gladness on finding her a guest in his father's

house; while Gertrude, unsuspecting of the emotion which rendered the expression of even these commonplace greetings difficult to him, simply thanked him with her sad sweet smile; and hastened to her apartment, in order not to restrain, by her presence, the mutual communications of the family.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER the return of Ernest Armstrong, the house gradually became filled with company, and it required all the resolution which Gertrude could command to enable her to endure this constant demand upon her energies, without falling back into her original depression; and yet, strange to say, she no longer felt an inclination to return to her desolate home. Too sadly aware that Miss Warrington was more than reconciled to her absence by the reflection that it decreased the expenses of her narrow household; and, once more habituated to the voice of sympathy and kindness, she shuddered as she remembered that the day must soon come in which she should once more be deprived of all this luxury of affection, and when her restored health would no longer afford her a pretext for extending her already lengthy visit.

The bustle and movement consequent upon the influx of visitors wearied and saddened her; but she found an equivalent in the perpetual and

brotherly kindness of Ernest, who, pleading the necessity of Eleanor's more general attention to their other guests, was constantly occupied in securing the comfort and amusement of the orphan. Nor was he diverted from his work of sympathy even by the smiles of the highborn beauties who now graced his mother's drawing-room, or the example of his own sporting companions; who, on their return from shooting, fishing, or boating, divided their remaining time between billiards and flirtation.

And all these attentions were so carefully as well as so zealously proffered, that they excited no remark even among the idlest and the most sarcastic of his associates. The beautiful invalid, with her pale brow and her dovelike eyes, was known to be an orphan, and a portionless one; while Ernest Armstrong was one of the best matches in the country; and consequently not one of his friends could for a moment believe him to be mad enough to dream of marrying her. The idols of the world must have hands of gold, even if they have brows of brass, and feet of clay; and the divinity of every other shrine is looked upon as an object of false worship. No, no; young Armstrong might waste his time in dangling about a pretty girl who was going to her grave, and thus show

the Lady Janes, and the Honourable Miss Lucys, that he was not a marrying man—which, by the bye, was rather clever on his part—but beyond this, of course there was nothing to be said; and so the “capital match” was left in peace to follow the dictates of his own heart and his own reason.

Mrs. Armstrong, meanwhile, was so perpetually occupied in doing the honours of her house, and in taking her share in every conversation that was going on about her, however unintelligible it might actually be to her limited capacity, that she had not a moment to waste in conjectural speculations; while Mary, happy in herself and in all around her, became egotistical in the very joy of her heart, and limited all her interest to her own narrow circle. Perhaps there were moments in which Eleanor felt startled; but she, too, believed it to be impossible that her fastidious and ambitious brother could seriously love the niece of old stingy Miss Warrington; and she had, moreover, become so sincerely attached to Gertrude, that she would not be convinced.

And Gertrude herself, even while she was grateful, deeply grateful, for the unwearied and gentle kindness of which she was the object, never for an instant conjectured that it had another source than the generous pity of one who was alike blessing

and blessed, to a suffering fellow-creature. She only felt that she was no longer alone in the world; that there were now two beings to whom her sufferings were not indifferent, and who would mourn over her were they to terminate as she had once hoped. She even looked upon the smiling face of Mary, and the beaming countenance of her destined husband, without remembering her own blighted hopes; and although a dark cloud at times settled upon her spirit, it seldom lingered. A resigned and placid melancholy had succeeded to the irritation of feeling to which she had previously yielded; and she had almost taught herself to believe that "it was well for her that she had been afflicted." She knew not that a great moral change was taking place within her, by which the image of Mortimer was fading more rapidly from her heart than time could have effaced it.

It chanced that on a sweet autumnal morning Gertrude found herself alone in the music-room, where she had been engaged in tuning Eleanor's harp; and having completed her task, she stood for a time at one of the low windows opening to the lawn, until at length, feeling invigorated by the soft balmy wind which was wakening the leaves to that low, luxurious, and mystic whisper,

which seems to speak to us in the language of another and a more harmonious world, she stepped out upon the velvet sward, and bared her brow to its gentle influence.

The sound of distant voices and ringing laughter reached her from the open windows of the house, and jarred with the soft serenity of the scene on which she looked ; and in order to secure a more perfect sense of solitude, she strolled onward under the flickering shadows of the shrubbery, and followed, with a languid step, the windings of a flower-bordered path, which led to an eminence commanding a view of the village of Bletchley, and the surrounding country.

Light fleecy clouds were flitting across a sky of intense blue, tempered, however, by that slight purple mist peculiar to an autumnal atmosphere ; the little stream at the bottom of the valley was sparkling and shimmering along its narrow channels ; the fields were alive with reapers ; the low gray church, half buried in ivy, had just caught the full radiance of the midday sun, and looked as though it were wreathed with emeralds ; the leaves of the willows, which at intervals skirted the water, danced merrily on their flexile stems to the music of the current over which they hung ; children called to each other as they sported among the

husbandmen; the lowing of the cattle rose from the luxuriant meadows; the birds were loud among the branches, and the butterflies fluttered from flower to flower; in short, it was one of those days so beautiful and so rare in our capricious climate, when Nature seemed to have donned her richest garb, and the whole earth to revel in a sense of its own beauty.

For awhile Gertrude stood entranced; tears filled her eyes, but they were tears of gratitude and praise. Soon, however, she became conscious that she had overtaxed her strength, and, slowly descending the height, she diverged towards the garden pavilion, in order to rest for a time before she returned to the house. The creeping roses, honeysuckles, and clematis, by which it was overgrown, had been suffered to run wild, and nearly obscured the entrance; but, putting them aside, Gertrude stepped lightly across the threshold, and started with mingled surprise and annoyance, to find herself intruding upon the privacy of Ernest Armstrong. A bright flush rose to the cheek of the young man as he bounded from the bench upon which he had been seated, and suffered his book to fall from his hand in his eagerness to welcome her.

“Gertrude—Miss Mortimer—” he exclaimed,

as he sprang forward to lead her to the seat which he had just abandoned; for, in her embarrassment, she had continued standing upon the same spot, without making an effort to advance; "Miss Mortimer here,—and alone! By what happy chance—"

"Forgive me, Mr. Armstrong;" faltered Gertrude, as she sank exhausted alike by fatigue and distress upon the bench; "I did not mean to invade your privacy. I thought you were with your friends."

"I dare not flatter myself that you sought my society;" he said, looking anxiously upon her; "but surely, Gertrude, you are ill, or unhappy! What has happened?"

"Nothing, believe me; nothing; but I have been imprudent. I have ascended the mound, forgetting that my strength is not equal to the exertion; and I came here to rest awhile. Pray forgive me."

"Surely you jest;" was the impetuous reply; "Oh, Gertrude, if you could only guess how I have sighed for this moment—this moment of happiness—when I may assure you of all my respect—all my regard."

"I have long felt, long acknowledged it;" murmured the fair girl, as she looked up gratefully and confidingly.

"Would that the conviction had served me better!" said Ernest, still retaining her hand; "would that it had induced you to confide more fully in a friendship in which you admit that you have faith. Gertrude, you are not happy. You have a hidden sorrow. I have long been convinced of this. Your painful illness has been an effect, not a cause. Seek not to deceive me. To common observers you may indeed be only an invalid crushed by mere physical ailment, but to me you are the prey of a deeper suffering."

The orphan answered only with her tears.

"Gertrude;" persisted the young man, as he seated himself beside her; "you have given me a right to consider myself your friend; give me likewise cause to feel that I indeed am so. Remember that you have become the adopted child of our house; that we have all learned to love you. Have I, then, no claim to ask for some answering trust? Perhaps I may be indiscreet; but did you know how cold every tear that you shed falls upon my own heart, you would forgive me."

A sudden faintness came over the orphan. She began to understand him—to understand herself; and she trembled at the revelation. She strove to withdraw her hand; she strove to rise and escape, but her agitation was too powerful.

“Gertrude!” exclaimed her companion reproachfully; “you do not do me justice.”

“Oh, recal that accusation for pity’s sake;” faltered the stricken girl; “I know and feel that you are indeed my friend.”

“And is that all, Gertrude? Is that all which you have felt and known? Have I, indeed, made myself so little understood? Or is it that you are indifferent to an affection which has now become to me a principle of existence?”

The orphan buried her face in her hands, and the hot tears streamed through her fingers.

“It must be as you will, Gertrude;” said Ernest as he started from her side, and paced hurriedly across the narrow floor; “But you know not how devoted a heart you would reject—you know not the depth of the affection which you would throw from you—you cannot guess the treasure of love which I have hoarded up only to cast it at your feet: you may be loved again, but never, never again as now.”

Gertrude looked up in alarm; her heart beat violently, and the tears were arrested in her eyes.

“No, no;” she exclaimed passionately; “You mistake yourself, Mr. Armstrong, and imagine that the generous sympathy which you have felt for me has grown into affection. But this cannot,

must not be. As yet we are almost strangers ; you are the only son of wealthy and powerful parents, while I am poor and friendless. You are full of life, and hope, and happiness, while I am already faded and crushed by trial and misfortune. How would your proud father brook such a marriage ? Forget that you have ever conceived so wild a thought. Be just to yourself ; and leave me, at least, the consolation of feeling that I have not lost a friend."

" You reason, Gertrude ;" said the young man reproachfully, " you reason coldly, where you should only feel. You disdain the heart which you have made your own."

" Do not mistake me ;" sobbed the orphan ; " I am already sufficiently unhappy. But remember only my position and your own. Remember the friendship and affection which have been lavished upon me by your family ; and then ask yourself if I could indeed listen to you without ingratitude ? Deeply, very deeply, do I feel my obligation for such a proof of your regard ; but I beseech you, if you would not expose me to the most bitter self-reproach, to bestow the warmer feelings of your heart upon another."

" Enough, Miss Mortimer ;" said her companion haughtily ; " I will endeavour to obey you. I have,

in truth, been worse than blind not to comprehend that your affection has been already bestowed elsewhere. I have now only to apologise for my presumption, and to wish you a happier fate than that which I would have secured to you."

As he ceased speaking, he seized his hat, and rushed from the pavilion.

As he disappeared Gertrude made a movement as though she would have detained him, for at that moment she felt as though she was once more about to become an alien from her kind. She was at last conscious that even while she believed herself to be living upon the memory of the past, she was in fact learning to love Ernest Armstrong, a lesson in which she had progressed but too well; and now she saw herself again thrust back upon the desolation of her own heart. The impulse was, however, only momentary, her better principle retained her in her seat: she might be wretched, but she would still continue blameless; she would not repay the trusting friendship of a whole family by blighting their proudest hopes; and thus, her extended hands were withdrawn, her labouring sobs were suffered to have way, and finally, her head sank upon the rustic table before her, and she wept as those only can weep

who see all the hopes of their existence shivered about them.

Forgetting alike where she was, and the time which had elapsed since she left the house, she remained for more than an hour sunk in a torpor of grief which scarcely allowed her to retain the faculty of thought. She only knew that she was wretched, very wretched; she only felt that her last luxury lay in the hot tears which were coursing each other down her pallid cheeks; when she was suddenly startled by the sound of a deep sigh immediately behind her.

She turned in alarm, and saw Ernest Armstrong standing a few paces from the bench upon which she was seated.

"Gertrude;" he said with deep emotion; "tell me the truth. I left you angry and miserable, but my anger could not last, nor can I longer endure my misery. As you hope for happiness in this life, be frank with me. Have I a share in those tears?"

"Mr. Armstrong;" faltered the orphan, as she extended to him her trembling hand; "should I be worthy of all the friendship-which you have shown to me for so many months if I could have witnessed unmoved the displeasure with which you lately quitted me? Oh, surely, surely, you at least should know me better!"

“And what more, Gertrude?” asked Ernest, again seating himself beside her: “Have I returned only to receive so formal an assurance as this? Do you believe me to be so weak, so frivolous, so unworthy, as to have sought your love without long and earnest reflection? Only tell me that it is not given to another; and even although it should not yet be mine I will await your will; I will trust to time, and to my own devoted affection, for ultimate success. I will struggle to deserve your preference, and to secure your happiness. I will be everything that you shall seek to make me.”

“I dare not listen to such words from your lips, Mr. Armstrong;” murmured Gertrude, as she endeavoured to rise from her seat.

“You shall not leave the pavilion, Gertrude, until my question is answered;” said her companion resolutely; “This day, this very hour, I must know my fate—and then, Gertrude, then, you will have made me the happiest man on earth, or—we meet no more.”

“Meet no more!” gasped the orphan, unconsciously echoing his words in an accent of such heart-struck anguish as rendered all further explanation superfluous.

“You are mine—deny it not, Gertrude, you

are mine ;” murmured the delighted young man, as he suddenly clasped her to his bosom ; “ Nay, chide me not—I will—I will release you—But no disclaimers—reason as you will now, and I will listen ; I have not loved you in vain, and all else I can support. Why do you turn away in displeasure, Gertrude ? Are you offended by my joy ? Nay, do not leave your seat ; I will abandon mine, if you condemn me to so great a sacrifice ; but do not drive me from you. See, I have even released your hand. What would you more ?”

“ Listen to me ;” said the weeping girl, struggling against the emotion which had dyed her cheeks and brow with a crimson blush ; “ Weak and unworthy as I feel such an avowal to be, I will no longer deny that—that——In short, Mr. Armstrong—”

“ Call me Ernest.”

“ In short ;” pursued the orphan, heedless of the interruption ; “ unconsciously, oh, believe me, most unconsciously, I have treacherously repaid the kindness of your family, by suffering myself to feel—to feel as I should not have done towards one for whom they have higher and prouder hopes.”

“ They all love you, Gertrude.”

“ But will they continue to do so when they learn how ill I have requited their friendship ?

“Will they not be indebted to you for my happiness, which is their first care?”

Gertrude shook her head despondingly. She had already learnt a bitter lesson in the world's lore, and she remembered that she was poor and powerless.

“Sceptic!” smiled her more sanguine companion; “have you no faith in my influence over the family which you appear so much to dread? I am aware that my good father will look grave, and talk of expediency, and prudence, and all those matters of which elderly gentlemen are accustomed to make bugbears to the young; but I shall appeal from his head to his heart, and I have never yet made such an appeal in vain. He already loves you as a child; so away with these puerile fears. Is it your fault if you are dearer to me than all else on earth? Are you to blame if you are lovelier and more estimable than others of your sex? Trust me, the day is not far distant when all under our roof will bless you for having rendered it both holier and happier.”

“I will endeavour to believe so;” murmured Gertrude with a faint smile; “but until I am welcomed by Mr. Armstrong himself, this subject must never be renewed between us. To-day I must remain at the Hall; for I feel that I have not

strength to encounter the fatigue of a removal; but tomorrow I shall return to the humble home which I ought never to have quitted; and then—" she concluded with a burst of tears, which she strove in vain to suppress; "then it will depend upon your father if I ever again become his guest."

Ernest was about to expostulate, but as he looked into the eyes of his companion he read there a determination against which he felt that it were vain to contend; and, accordingly, he raised her hand respectfully to his lips in silence.

"And now leave me;" said Gertrude imploringly; "if, indeed, you love me, leave me alone to think. I have need of thought: alas! I fear, too much; but, at least, spare me all further self-reproach."

"Do you regret my happiness?"

Once more she smiled through her tears, and he felt that he was answered.

"And you will wear this rose for my sake, Gertrude, will you not?" whispered the young man tenderly, as he broke away a branch of the flowering parasite which trailed across the entrance of the pavilion.

"I will, if you obey, and leave me now."

“I am gone;” was the murmured reply, and still he lingered.

Five minutes more wore away; and then the blooming branches were hurriedly thrust aside, and he sprang lightly into the sunshine; looked back for a second into the depths of the rustic apartment, and disappeared among the tall shrubs near its entrance.

CHAPTER XIV.

ERNEST had no sooner departed than Gertrude sank upon her knees. Divided between happiness and self-reproach, she had no longer power to trust to her own strength. What had she done?—and what was she about to do? She felt bewildered and alarmed. How little had she understood the nature of her own feelings; how little had she been prepared for the ordeal through which she had just passed! That she should have permitted herself to love Ernest Armstrong, appeared to her at one moment as monstrous; she who knew all the ambitious views of his family, and all the lofty aspirings of his own nature. And she had been doing this while she believed herself to be still weeping over the smouldering embers of a scorned and now sinful attachment. The new phoenix had risen from the ashes which she had deemed extinguished for ever.

She passed her hand over her throbbing eyeballs, as though she sought to awaken from a wild dream, but all was still vivid in its truth. The

branch of roses lay on the table beside her ; the book, upon which Ernest had been engaged when she entered, remained where it had fallen from his hand ; strive as she would, there was no room for doubt.

Ere long her thoughts wandered to Mr. Armstrong, and she trembled as she reflected upon his probable indignation ; while, solitary as she was, and although no eye was upon her, a blush of mingled pride and shame rose to her brow as she pictured to herself the reproaches which he would fasten upon the penniless orphan, who had accepted his hospitality only to blight the prospects of his son ; and she bowed her head, self-convicted, and would at that moment gladly have forgone all her newly-born hopes of happiness to escape his just rebuke.

Gradually, however, her reflections became less gloomy ; and she raised her drooping head, and pillowed it upon her arm, as she wiped away the intrusive tears which were still coursing each other down her cheeks, and fastened her thoughts upon Ernest, and the affection which he had vowed to her.

Was she, indeed, so very much to blame for having failed to remain insensible to such a passion ? Had he not devoted himself to her in

misfortune and in suffering?—Had he not extended to her the hand of friendship, when that of the world was closed against her? Was he not all that the heart of woman could covet in him she loved? And all these questions were answered with a throbbing pulse, until she became almost acquitted in her own eyes.

But Gertrude had still another doubt, another pang, to combat. The more perfect she taught herself to believe Ernest, the more a sense of her own unworthiness fastened upon her. While he had bestowed on her all the fervour of a first attachment, she had requited it only by the gift of a worn and weary heart. In every phase of the transfer it was unequal. On his side were worldly independence, social station, and an entire and devoted passion; on hers poverty, obscurity, and blighted hopes.

As this conviction grew upon her she wept over herself, for she felt that she was indeed a bankrupt in all that makes life brilliant; and a thousand times did she upbraid herself for the selfishness which had led her to listen to the addresses of such a suitor.

Repentance, however, came too late; and apprehensive that, should she longer delay her return to the house, her absence might create some alarm as

to her safety in the mind of Eleanor, Gertrude, rousing herself from her abstraction, smoothed the tangled hair upon her brow, bathed her swollen eyes, and carefully lifting the cherished rose-branch, which had been the first gift of love, from the table, folded her shawl about her, and turned slowly in the direction of the Hall.

What a change had taken place in her whole destiny during the last few hours!—what a change in all her feelings! She scarcely knew whether to rejoice or to mourn on finding that she had voluntarily flung from her all the old associations of years; and was almost ready to ask herself if, indeed, a new scheme of happiness could grow out of the ashes of the past. Moreover Gertrude, meek as she was, possessed, nevertheless, a proud spirit; and when she reflected upon the time in which her hand would have been eagerly sought, while now it could scarcely be that her alliance would be more than coldly welcomed by the family of Mr. Armstrong, while it might even be scornfully rejected, tears of wounded feeling rose to her eyes, and she felt tempted to recant her concession, limited as it had been.

But where is the young heart which does not reawaken to the touch of hope? Where is the grave so deep that no flower will spring upon its

surface? Gertrude remembered her lost home, her blighted visions, her crushed affections: she recalled to her mind's eye the dreary roof, and the ungenial society of her aunt; and once more she smiled as the attachment of Ernest Armstrong rose before her; an attachment which had scorned to yield before difficulty and self-sacrifice; and again she resolved to leave her fate in his hands.

All these internal combats nevertheless weakened both her mental and physical strength, and she became convinced that, even had not a sense of propriety dictated the measure, an immediate removal from the exhausting gaieties of the Hall was necessary to the preservation of her convalescence, while her absence would tend to test the consistency of her suitor; and it was accordingly with a firm resolution to carry out her project of departure, that she at length reached the house, pale and languid, only to be tenderly chidden for her imprudence in wandering out alone in her then state of weakness.

The announcement of her intended return home on the morrow, elicited still more remonstrance. Eleanor could not spare her; Mr. Armstrong, on his arrival, would be annoyed to find that she had left them before her health was thoroughly re-established; Mary revealed the secret of a

projected fishing-party, where she affectionately assured her that she would be indispensable, a declaration in which she was warmly seconded by Somerville ; and the old lady insisted upon several points, so strangely involved that it was difficult to comprehend their bearing upon the case. One individual only remained totally silent throughout the whole discussion, and that one was Ernest: he heard even the guests of his mother join in the general entreaty, and saw tears of gratification stand in the soft eyes of the fair girl as she replied to each appeal; and still he sat by, apparently engaged with a newspaper, and without uttering a sentence.

At length Eleanor, distressed, and almost annoyed, to find all her endeavours fail in changing the resolution of her friend, suddenly turned towards her brother for assistance, exclaiming eagerly,—

“Am I not right, Ernest? Do you not consider Gertrude very imprudent to leave us yet?”

“If you really desire my opinion;” was the reply, and to every eye, save one, it was calmly and almost indifferently uttered; “I consider that if Miss Mortimer conceives it to be necessary and right to return to Bletchley, she should be left free to follow the dictates of her own judgment; but should she happily see cause in an

hour or two to alter her opinion, she knows how much she has it in her power to oblige us all."

"And yet you persist, Gertrude;" said Eleanor reproachfully.

And Gertrude did persist; and the following day saw her once more an inmate of the humble dwelling of Miss Warrington; enduring, as best she might, the condolences of her companion upon her pale cheeks and nerveless step; her inferences as to their cause; and her regret that she did not possess more self-command.

Gertrude blushed as she listened; for, naturally ingenuous, she felt that she was guilty of tacit deceit in thus indulging her aunt in her erroneous lamentations. Yet what had she to tell? That Ernest Armstrong loved her? Of what avail were such a confidence, when out of that passion there might grow nothing save mortification and disappointment to herself? Better, far better, that the worthy old gentlewoman should cling to her first illusion, than that she should be enabled to break up new ground, and imagine fresh subjects of grievance. Even in the solitude of her chamber, moreover, the orphan no longer found peace. In weeping over her sorrows she had experienced that strange sad luxury which, by some occult dispensation, those who mourn deeply ever

feel when alone with their affliction ; but now that most bitter of all sufferings, suspense, was her daily and hourly companion ; a suspense rendered doubly difficult to bear, as it involved at once her happiness and her self-esteem.

During the last eventful evening at the Hall she had found an opportunity to forbid the visits of Ernest ; and, with right-minded delicacy, had also interdicted all correspondence until the decision of his father should have been made. In vain did the young man expostulate upon what he termed the overstrained and unnecessary cruelty of this arrangement : Gertrude was firm.

“Should Mr. Armstrong consent ;” she said meekly ; “the privation will ultimately have been unimportant ; should it prove otherwise, we have already met too often, and I owe it both to you and myself to terminate our intercourse at once.”

Strong in her sense of right, to this resolution she adhered ; and, finding that it was in vain to oppose her will, Ernest could only declare a determination in his turn to proceed at once to town in order to have an immediate interview with his father, and by these means shorten the period of their separation.

Thus the orphan found herself once more almost alone ; for although she had become more dear

than ever to the friends whom she had left, they were less able than before to devote a portion of their time to her. The duties which the presence of their numerous guests imposed upon them, and which were rendered still more imperative by the sudden and incomprehensible desertion of Ernest, confined them strictly to their own immediate circle; and, had it not been for the kindly messages, and affectionate notes which constantly reached her, Gertrude might have found some trouble in reconciling herself to the conviction that the old Hall and its warm-hearted inhabitants still remained in her neighbourhood.

Moreover, long and weary days went by, and there were no news of Ernest. He had failed, then, and he left her to divine that failure in his silence. Once more she was scorned—once more her heart was widowed; and she, who had believed for many many months of heaviness that she could never love again, had suffered herself once more to hope only to be once more deceived. Such was at last her firm conviction; and although she wept over the loss of such a heart as that which she had won; she did not yield, as on a former occasion, to this new weight of woe. Her woman-pride nerved her to support the trial with dignity, and there were moments in which she

found herself mentally consoling Ernest under a disappointment which she strove to consider as inevitable. And then she glanced at her own future existence, when all should be indeed over between them; but the anticipation chilled her, and she closed her eyes as if to shut out the vision. Enough that it was hers to live and suffer; he, at least, might soon again be joyous and happy as she had first known him. A thousand cares, and avocations, and hopes, would wean her from his memory; and he would be restored to his family and to himself, when she was—forgotten!

Such a consolation fell cold upon her heart, as the night-dew upon grave-flowers; the blossoms might revive beneath its influence, but the dark tomb felt it not; and so time wore on, until three weary weeks had expired, and the faint hectic which had almost disappeared from the cheek of the orphan began once more to tinge the delicate skin; a low cough was occasionally heard to escape from her pallid lips; and the cold moisture which bathed her brow at intervals rendered the long and flexile tresses by which it was shaded languid and dull.

To Miss Warrington these changes were imperceptible; but Mr. Pilbeam was more clear-sighted; and he ere long began to insist with extreme

pertinacity upon her instant return to the Hall. Gertrude was, however, inflexible ; attributing her weakness to the extreme sultriness of the season, and the difficulty which it induced in her breathing ; while, to her infinite relief, she found herself supported in her argument by her aunt, who, having become sufficiently attached to her society to find her renewed solitude irksome, strongly opposed her removal.

Baffled at the cottage, the little apothecary, seriously alarmed for his patient, and not altogether indifferent to the *éclat* of a visit to the Hall, when it was known throughout the neighbourhood that Miss Mortimer was no longer its inhabitant, hastened to tell his tale of fear, and to hint his wishes to Mrs. Armstrong ; but once more he was destined to disappointment. The good old lady shed a shower of tears as she learnt the relapse of her favourite ; Eleanor turned pale, and clung to a chair for support ; while Mary loudly and earnestly expressed her grief ; but beyond these demonstrations of interest and affection, none of them progressed. In vain did he declare the necessity for immediate change of air and habits ; in vain did he remark how wonderfully beneficial her residence at the Hall had proved upon a previous occasion ; in vain did he

imply the expediency of her instant return; he was listened to with consideration and anxiety, but all his strategy proved fruitless; and at length, feeling that he had no right, and should, moreover, be very impolitic to endeavour to force upon the mistress of the house a guest who had, from some cause or other, evidently ceased to be welcome beneath her roof, he reluctantly rose, and took his leave; although not until he had promised to give Mrs. Armstrong constant intelligence of his patient.

Mr. Pilbeam ruminated as he descended the hill on his return homeward, upon the probable cause of so marked and unfavourable a change. It was true that all the ladies of the family had deeply felt his communication, but they had studiously confined their comments upon Miss Mortimer to the subject of her illness; and they had evidently avoided with the greatest care all reply to his inferred proposition. What could it mean? Mrs. Pilbeam, called to the council in his surgery, while he prepared sundry mysterious medicaments of divers colours, dropped or poured from tall, capacious looking glass bottles with ground stoppers and gilded etiquettes, into little slim phials of two or three inches in length, with long labels, neatly inscribed and folded, suspended from their

necks; and then having corked them carefully, passed them across the counter to his anxiously listening helpmate, who concluded the operation by crowning them with head-pieces of bright scarlet paper, which she trimmed rapidly and neatly round the edges with a huge pair of scissors—Mrs. Pilbeam, however, elucidated the mystery at once.

It was, she declared, precisely what might have been expected. What could the Hall people want with poor Miss Warrington's niece but to make use of her? And what use could she be of now, when they had a housefull of friends to amuse them? She couldn't help saying, however, that she was very glad of it; for when people set themselves up to be better than other people, it did them good to have their pride pulled down; though she must confess that she was very sorry the poor girl fretted so much, although, if there was no sickness among the gentry, Mr. Pilbeam would be reduced to practise upon his parish poor, which was neither pleasant nor profitable; so that everything was for the best, after all.

The busy apothecary listened, nodded, mixed and labelled assiduously, until his daily duties were completed; occasionally venturing upon an inference, or uttering a regret that his own popu-

larity might be, perchance, diminished at the Great House by this untoward event ; and, finally, satisfied that his quick-witted wife had solved the enigma, protested, with an anxious sigh, that he trusted he should be able to support the system of his patient until the departure of the Hall-guests made her return there desirable to the family.

“ You know, my dear ;” he concluded ; “ that before the visit of Miss Mortimer, I had never been called in by the Armstrongs, except to attend the domestics ; and I made a great advance when I exchanged the servants’ hall for the drawing-room, eh ? and that it is which makes this business doubly vexatious, and really very detrimental to me. Who can tell what good fortune might have occurred, if the poor thing had been allowed to remain where she was, eh ? An accident, or an attack of fever, might have induced them, when I was on the spot, to employ me, instead of sending off an express to the town, as they have always done. But I do believe that I was born to be unlucky.”

Be this as it might, and certainly the worthy apothecary’s position was sufficiently obscure to prove that he was at least no inordinate favourite of the blind goddess, it is certain that before noon the next day, all the magnates of Bletchley were

aware that the proud Miss Mortimer had been made to understand that there was not room at the Hall for her, while the grandees from London were there; and great was the gratulation of the maiden sisters, and the minister's widow, when the secret was confided to them.

As to the Misses Bayliss, they declared their conviction, that poor Miss Warrington's still poorer relation might make up her mind that she had seen the last of the Hall; as, indeed, it would seem that she had done, by her fretting herself ill again; for, of course, the Armstrongs could hardly be so barefaced as to have her up there again directly their house was empty; and then in the spring they would be off to town; and by the time they returned, they would have forgotten all about her.

Nothing could be more feasible or more rational; nor did Gertrude herself venture for a moment to entertain a different opinion. They *would* soon forget her. They *would* leave Bletchley early in the spring; for she had been present when the arrangement was made, and had even been urged to join their party. They *would* abstain from seeking her society before their departure. And thus, from very different premises, and with very different feelings, the same conclusion was attained.

Gertrude was wretched, for she was hopeless ; but even this hopelessness served to sustain her. As she had nothing now to anticipate, so also she had nothing to fear. Her fate was accomplished. And yet, she felt that one parting explanation might have been vouchsafed to her ; and her pride was wrung, that although the letters of Eleanor, after having reached her at longer intervals, and then ceased altogether, had seemed to announce a cessation of all friendship, the daily present of game, or fruit, or flowers had never failed. It was as though they had withdrawn their regard, and now conceded only their compassion.

The sensitive delicacy of the orphan was deeply wounded ; and while her aunt constantly expiated upon the persevering attentions of her new friends, the unhappy orphan turned sickening from the dainties for which she was indebted to them, and suffered the most rare and beautiful flowers to wither for want of tendance, or banished them from her room upon the plea that they affected her breathing. There was, however, one faded rose-branch which she cherished, although colour and scent had long since departed from it ; her heart was not yet so full as to shut out that cherished memory.

Become too feeble to walk unattended, Ger-

trude was soon compelled to content herself with the air which she could procure through an open window ; and there she remained seated for hours, with a book or a needle in her hand, listening abstractedly to the economical dissertations of her rigid aunt, and lost in a maze of painful thought.

She was so sitting upon one occasion, on a sweet evening, when the glow of the setting sun shed a golden glory over her pale features, and glistened amid her long languid curls ; looking rather like a seraph than a mortal, and thinking, as was her habit, of the quiet grave which would so soon bury alike her and her griefs, in all the luxury of solitude ; Miss Warrington having left the room upon some household duty ; when she suddenly became conscious of a thick and hurried breathing, which betrayed that some stranger had paused beside her. Easily alarmed, she was about to retire, when a light form bounded through the gate of the little fence, and, in the next instant, before her tottering limbs had power to second her will, Ernest Armstrong stood before her, his eager hands grasping the window-sill, and his fine countenance glowing with joy and animation.

“Gertrude, my own Gertrude ;” he exclaimed passionately ; “ We have conquered ! At last you are mine. My father has sent me before him, to

prepare you for his visit. He comes to embrace his new daughter."

The orphan gazed fixedly at him for an instant, and then fell back upon her seat speechless and powerless. She had struggled against her despair, but she had not strength to support this sudden revulsion of feeling. With the quick glance of affection, Ernest at once discovered the error of which he had been guilty in the happiness of his own heart; and, in another moment, he had sprung into the apartment, and was at her feet.

"What have I done, Gertrude?" he whispered tenderly; "Speak to me, dearest, and assure me that the past is forgiven; that the silence which you enforced upon me, has not led to a doubt of my affection; that I am welcome, even although I may have been long in coming. One word, Gertrude, only one, if you still love me."

Gertrude strove to utter the assurance that he asked, but her pale lips trembled without regaining the force of utterance; and then it was that, surprised at her prolonged silence, the agitated young man looked more earnestly upon her, and recognised the ravages which the last few weeks had made in her whole person.

The shudder which passed over his frame alone betrayed his wretchedness, but it was elo-

quent—for a moment he feared that he had returned *too late*—and he eagerly fastened his eyes upon her wasted features and sunken form, as if to ask himself whether indeed there were yet hope.

After a time, however, his anxious and affectionate devotion appeared to call back the fleeting senses of the orphan, and a convulsive sob announced her return to consciousness. A deep blush rose to her faded cheek as she found herself in the arms of Ernest, and her first impulse was to liberate herself; but the clasp of affection was not to be so readily flung off; and it was with increased tenderness that Ernest appealed to her feelings, to her fidelity, and to her justice.

“You have doubted me, Gertrude;” he murmured reproachfully; “you have doubted me, or I should not find you thus. I can read hours of misgiving and of reproach upon the pale brow that rests so languidly upon my shoulder. When I approached the window, I saw you as radiant as ever, and little did I suspect that it was the mere cheat of a mocking light. Why have you been thus ungenerous towards me? Did you not know that when, for the first time in my life, I pleaded with my father, I was pleading for the happiness of my whole life—nay, for that very life

itself? And did you indeed judge so poorly of me as to believe that I would be worsted in such a cause?"

A faint and timid smile rose to the lip of the orphan.

"Time has passed, I know it but too well;" pursued Ernest; "since the cruel moment in which you banished me from your presence until I could return with my father's sanction to our marriage; and you are also quite aware that my father loves you; but, nevertheless, his ambition—his vanity—call it what you will—had led him to form other projects for his son; and you must therefore forgive him even though he should have exhibited such pertinacious reluctance in yielding to my prayer. Believe me also, dearest, when I assure you that your dignity has never been compromised even for an instant; it could not be, for that dignity was also mine. As regarded your birth there were, of course, no scruples; for therein we were equals. You see that I am frank with you, Gertrude; for we love each other; and I feel that I have no right, as certainly I have no wish, to mislead you. The difficulty was at once less in importance, and more powerful in effect. You are as well aware as myself that the Armstrongs were, some generations ago, the most

wealthy family in the county, and my father had encouraged strange visions that I was destined to restore their ancient affluence by what the world calls a fortunate marriage; but I knew too well that this was a popular misnomer, as it is commonly understood, and that my happiness must have a more solid and tangible foundation. In short, we discussed the matter until he became convinced that I had reason on my side; and now, now I transgress no duty in telling you that I am all your own."

"And shall you indeed never regret so great a sacrifice, Ernest? Shall you never weary of your poor penniless bride?" asked his listener tenderly.

"Do we weary of the air we breathe, Gertrude? Are you not the one thought, the one interest of my existence? In losing you I should have lost all that rendered life endurable. But this fear is past; and now I have only to entreat of you to take more care of my happiness than it is evident you have done of late; for truly, dearest, you are sadly changed."

"I know it;" said the pale girl, as she swept her languid hand across her brow; "I am, indeed, as you remark, sadly changed; but joy is a skilful physician. You are here, and all will soon once more be well with me."

For the first time the enraptured lover ventured to touch with his lips the forehead which reposed upon his shoulder; and he did so unchidden, for the strength of the orphan was ebbing rapidly beneath the conflicting emotion of the last half hour, and the heart of the young man heaved as he watched the colour rise and fade, in rapid alternation, upon her cheek.

It was, consequently, almost with a feeling of relief, that he heard the sound of approaching footsteps; and while Gertrude instinctively withdrew herself from his hold, he hastily rose from his seat, and stood beside her. In the next instant, Miss Warrington entered the room, and an exclamation of surprise escaped her lips as she remarked the presence of the intruder.

"I owe you a thousand apologies, my dear madam;" said Ernest in reply, as he advanced towards her with extended hand; "I feel that I have been guilty of a most unceremonious entrance beneath your roof; but I trust that you will pardon the indiscretion when I tell you that I came here to claim my bride."

"Your bride, Mr. Armstrong!" echoed the bewildered old lady, as she sank almost as breathless as the orphan herself, into her accustomed arm-chair; "Beware, young gentleman, how you jest

with a Mortimer. *I* am old and powerless, it is true; but Gertrude is not altogether friendless, and she must not be made the sport of idle vanity."

And as she spoke, her tall figure grew yet taller; while the fingers generally so tightly clasped, were extended and outstretched as if in warning.

"You wrong me, Miss Warrington;" was the proud reply; "I come as a suppliant, not as a jester; and I am even now momentarily awaiting the arrival of my father to second my suit. I love, and have long loved your niece, and she has condescended to return my affection; family affairs, with which I will not weary you, have detained me some time in town; and I regret to perceive, that during my absence the health of Gertrude has not progressed as I had hoped. She has, however, promised me that she will exert all her energies to recover strength; and we must trust that care and zeal will aid her successfully in the effort. And now, my dear madam, do you still refuse your hand to your new nephew?"

The astonishment of the stately old lady, far from diminishing, only increased with every word to which she listened; but as she saw the meek and appealing eyes of Gertrude fixed upon her, she almost unconsciously placed her hand in that

of the young man who stood respectfully before her, and drew a long breath as though she would have heaved a heavy weight from her breast.

"You have told me nothing of this, Miss Mortimer;" she at length said in her most sententious tones; "and you have been wrong. I am your natural guardian, and could not have objected to this marriage, provided it be, as I trust it is, welcome to Mr. Armstrong's family; for otherwise I at once refuse my sanction, and cannot countenance the visits of this gentleman."

There was no opportunity for either Gertrude or her lover to reply to this solemn announcement, for the words were still upon the lips of Miss Warrington, when a carriage stopped at the door, and the Squire was announced. Vainly did the poor girl endeavour to rise from her chair to receive him; the throbbing of her heart was so violent, that she could only clasp her hands together, and gasp for breath; but she soon overcame this undue emotion; and pride lent her strength, as Mr. Armstrong turned from the ceremonious greeting of the maiden aunt, to welcome him, if not with complete composure, at least with perfect self-possession.

There was a slight, a very slight shade of constraint upon the brow of the Squire, which did

not escape the anxious eyes of Gertrude; and perhaps it was fortunate that she remarked it, for it gave her nerve, conscious, as she was, that she had used no unworthy means to secure the affection of his son. He, however, seated himself beside her, after having given a nod of intelligence to Ernest, who was eagerly watching his movements; and kindly taking her hand, expressed the regret which he felt at her 'altered appearance.

"We have all been in error, my dear Miss Mortimer;" he pursued, although with visible effort; "and that mad boy yonder not the least. What business had he to agitate and harass you with his foolish fancies when you had no strength to spare? And what business had you to listen, when you should have been thinking of your health, and endeavouring to take care of yourself? Oh! my pretty Gertrude;" he whispered more affectionately, as he saw the large tears swelling in her eyes; "what business had I, old fool as I was, to suppose that I knew better what was good for him than he did himself? However, as we have all been wrong, we must all endeavour to be wiser in future. You will not find Ernest half so troublesome, now that he is sure of having his own way; while your little heart will be at ease,

and that will prove the best medicine in your own case. As for me, Gertrude, you must forget that I did not do justice to your merits at once, as perhaps I should have done; for I have had to contend against a host of old hopes, and of old memories, by which I have been haunted since his boyhood. How say you, madam?" he added, addressing the old lady; "As we have each made some sacrifice should we not each also make some concession?"

"My dear Sir;" broke in the happy Gertrude; "how can I reply to such unhopèd-for indulgence? But, indeed, indeed, I am not unworthy of it. I have long despaired in silence, without one feeling save that of gratitude towards yourself. I did not dare to hope, but I at least avoided all self-reproach."

"I know it, my dear young lady, I know it;" was the cordial rejoinder; "Had it been otherwise you would not have been the little Gertrude who robbed us all of our hearts. And the more I look at you, the more I feel disposed to admit that Ernest is right; and that you will, after all, bring him the best dowry."

"I am acquitted, then, in your eyes at least, Sir;" said the young man with a triumphant smile.

“Fully—honourably acquitted; and I receive with joy to my heart and home the daughter you have selected for me.”

And as he spoke, the kind old Squire folded the agitated orphan in his arms, and kissed her with paternal tenderness.

“Tomorrow;” he pursued after the pause of a moment, during which no one made an effort to break the silence; “tomorrow Mrs. Armstrong and the girls will be with you early; nay, they wanted to invade the carriage to-night, when they learnt my errand; but they had grumbled so much for the last few weeks at what they were pleased to call my unkindness, in debarring them from the society of their favourite, that I resolved to punish them for their want of obedience; and so, in spite of all their reproaches and entreaties, I set forth alone; as the young gentleman opposite had done before me, although I suggested that we should travel in company. So you see, my pretty Gertrude, that you must put on all your best looks to receive them, or incur the risk of undergoing a course of Mrs. Armstrong’s dieting, and nursing, and warning, when you may pass your time more pleasantly.”

“And Eleanor, and Mary? Do they really still love me?” asked the orphan with emotion.

“ For Eleanor I can answer at once ;” smiled Mr. Armstrong ; “ as for Mary, her love appears to be monopolised by Somerville, but I dare say that you will nevertheless be able to come to an understanding. And now I must take my leave ; and so, moreover, must this young gentleman, who has agitated you more than enough already, and against whom I shall request Miss Warrington to close her doors if he does not conduct himself with becoming prudence ; for as he has insisted upon giving me a daughter, so, in my turn, I shall insist that she be taken proper care of.”

Ernest would fain have expostulated, and turned an imploring look from his father to his hostess, but he met with no encouragement from either. Mr. Armstrong, vanquished alike by his affection for his son and his regard for Gertrude, had succeeded in overcoming all distaste to their marriage, and had consequently not seen without alarm the fearful state of weakness to which she was reduced, while he instantly felt the necessity of protecting her from all undue excitement ; and thus it was evident that he anticipated no opposition to his will, as he avoided the eye of the young man like one who would admit no further discussion upon the subject ; while Miss Warrington, half bewildered, and half alarmed at what was passing about

her, felt like a person under the influence of an agitating dream, and was looking anxiously for the departure of her self-constituted guests.

There was accordingly no appeal; and with a parting word which lasted throughout a somewhat lengthy and explanatory leave-taking between the sententious old lady and the simply-mannered Squire, Ernest was compelled at last to relinquish the hand which had been confidently abandoned to him, and to follow his father to the carriage with as much philosophy as he could command; nor was it until the sound of their retreating wheels convinced her that they were indeed gone, that Miss Warrington turned towards her niece with wonder and reproach alike upon her lips; but her words fell powerless on the closed ear of her companion. The reaction of feeling had consumed her small remaining amount of strength, and the orphan lay back insensible in her chair.

With eager but mistaken zeal, Miss Warrington and her handmaiden hastened to arouse the exhausted girl from the perfect repose of mind and body induced by the syncope into which she had fallen, and to convey her to her chamber, where, at her earnest request, they left her to reflect upon all the un hoped-for events of the last few hours. And very strange, almost too strange for sober

self-gratulation, appeared the total change which had supervened in all her feelings. Again and again she asked herself if it indeed were true; if it were not merely a cheat of her wandering reason? But again and again she was enabled to recal every word and almost every look; she seemed still to feel the pressure of the old man's lips upon her cheek, and the warm clasp of the hand which had so long been closed over her own; and she smiled the heart's smile as every succeeding moment strengthened her consciousness of the truth. She who had been so long an outcast, was then, indeed, at last to know the blessings of domestic affection; to be called by the endearing names of daughter—sister—wife!—to see herself the object of care, and tenderness, and love, when she had taught herself to believe that from all these holy privileges she was inexorably shut out. Her sense of happiness became almost painful. She had learnt to support suffering, but she was feeble as an infant under this new sensation. The very silence appeared vocal to her, and the air laden with gentle voices, and the evening twilight bright with kindly smiles. Her narrow room was peopled with joyous visions, and her solitude made cheerful by their presence.

One dark shadow, and one only, gloomed amid

the brightness of her thoughts; she had forgotten that she was poor, and that her poverty had for a time closed the heart of him to whom she was soon to pay the duty of a child; she forgot that this same poverty would compel her to go a portionless bride to the arms of her destined husband; she had ceased to remember all her past struggles, and to weep over her faded beauty; but there was still one painful memory which would not be silenced. She had become an alien from the affection of her nearest relative; the playmate of her childhood, and the friend of her youth. Yes, from the period of his marriage it was evident that he had ceased to interest himself in her fate, perhaps even to recal her existence; and the affectionate heart of Gertrude swelled even amid her new sense of happiness, and the tears of disappointed feeling fell from her eyes, as this intrusive recollection forced itself upon her.

Although all her early dreams of hope had long melted away, like those ice-palaces which are constructed upon the Neva, only to melt beneath the next change of temperature; she yet clung to the son of that more than mother who had watched over her girlish years with a tenderness of which she had never hoped to be again the object; still she thought of him as of a loved and cherished

brother; and the heart cannot easily forego so blessed a bond.

Thus there was yet one drop of gall in the overflowing cup of her meek delight; and for a while that drop appeared to taint the whole draught; but gradually she became awakened to the weakness of yielding to such depressing memories, and although the painful impression still remained, she compelled herself to turn to other and brighter thoughts, until she finally sank to sleep, to dream of Ernest Armstrong, and to be happy.

CHAPTER XV.

SYBIL and Mortimer were man and wife ; and they were travelling over that glorious Italy which they both loved so well, and were so well able to appreciate. More beautiful than ever in the eyes of her enraptured bridegroom, Mrs. Mortimer was radiant with smiles, bright with genius, and affectionate even beyond his hope. Surrounded by all the appliances of luxury, she had scarcely time to form a wish ere it was eagerly fulfilled ; her days were all sunshine, and her heart all triumph. Now, indeed, she could defy fate ; now, indeed, she was revenged upon that world which had dared to scorn her ; and if she did not love her husband as he deserved to be loved, she could at least so thoroughly feign the tenderness for which he sought as to blind him to the fact.

At length they reached Rome ; and here they had decided to spend a long and delicious month among the old and glorious memories of the past. No prospect could be more enchanting to Frederic :

possessed of his long-coveted bride, and existing in the land of his predilection, he had not a desire unfulfilled; but Sybil soon became less enthusiastic than himself, and there was an evident restlessness in her manner each morning as they set forth to visit the memorable monuments of the Imperial City.

One of her constant cares since leaving England had been to examine the visitors' book of every hotel at which they took up their temporary abode; and although Frederic found an equal amusement in the heterogeneous assemblage of autographs thus placed under his eyes; yet, as he sat with his arm folded about the slight figure of his wife,—his glance following the direction of her finger—and laughed with her at the pompous announcements attached to the plebeian names of Tomkins, Jenkins, Smith, *è tutti quanti*, it was nevertheless evident that Sybil attached a serious interest to the survey, in which he was far from participating. A sigh of relief escaped her as she closed the dingy volume upon each occasion until that upon which we shall rejoin her.

Rome was crowded with foreigners; and it was not without considerable difficulty that Mortimer succeeded in securing for Sybil such accommodation as he considered worthy of her. The

streets were loud with those trivial sounds of mere common-place every-day life, which form so paltry and puerile a contrast with the grand and stately relics of buried centuries; bright bonnets and idle laughter desecrated the mysteries of the Coliseum; dingy droschys and dusty berlins crowded the hotel yards; vociferous oaths in English, German, and Italian, were growled, screamed, or muttered on every side; the churches and the coffee-houses were alike full; and every thing promised what the degenerate Romans of the present day, in their greed of gain, and carelessness of the faded glories of the past, denominate a magnificent season.

The hotel-book was full of names, on which the ink had as yet had scarcely time to dry. Highnesses, duchesses, peers, and chevaliers of every order under the sun, were intermingled in sublime confusion with city-knights, touring-traders, and chevaliers d'industrie. It was evident that not a hope of even partial seclusion remained for the married lovers. The fingers of Sybil had already indicated her acquaintance with at least a dozen of the new arrivals, while Frederic himself had discovered more than one name which was full of old associations. As yet, however, neither had been sufficiently discouraged to utter more than

an impatient "Pshaw!" at each encounter, until the somewhat cramped and hyper-flourished signature of the Prince de Saviatti caused an involuntary start on the part of the lady, which brought a bright flush into her cheek.

"You know *il illustrissimo Principe*, Sybil?" said Mortimer, who had observed her emotion.

"Yes;" was the somewhat embarrassed reply; "in so far as such an individual really can be known. I met him frequently during a season in town, when, as he expressed it, he was 'doing his England;' and I confess that I am surprised to find him here, when I believed that he was in Egypt, or China, or at the antipodes, *pour promener sa paresse*; for he is full of Sicilian prejudices, and always laughed at my enthusiasm for Rome and its treasures."

"He is evidently no favourite of yours;" remarked her husband, who had detected an unusual tinge of bitterness in her tone.

Sybil attempted a contemptuous laugh. "I have had few favourites;" she said, as she passed her small and jewelled hand through the clustering curls of her companion: a liberty which he resented by drawing her to his bosom, and thus affording her the opportunity she sought of recovering her self-possession; "and poor Saviatti

is sufficiently well satisfied with himself to be able to dispense with all extraneous adoration; but I confess that for a time he amused me. You know, Frederic, that all depends upon the mood of the moment, and that the antics of the monkey sometimes interest as much as the stateliness of the lion; and thus Saviatti, all prince though he be, or at least call himself, was my monkey during three months, after which I totally lost sight of him."

Mortimer was silent. It was not that one suspicion of Sybil's truth rushed across his mind; but as yet that past, into which he so ardently desired to penetrate, remained a mystery to him. On the eve of her marriage he had not ventured to hazard a question, lest she might be pained by such an implied want of confidence; and since she had been his wife he had thought of her, only of her, and flung from him every anxiety save that of contributing to her happiness.

Now, however, for the first time he remembered that he had made no progress in her confidence, and that he was indebted to chance for every revelation connected with her early life. Nor had he felt altogether convinced by the explanation which he had extorted; for he could not conceal from himself that it was overstrained, and that its flippancy but ill disguised its hollowness.

It was, therefore, under the influence of a sensation as painful as it was novel to him, that he replied somewhat sarcastically; "In that case the meeting is a fortunate one; for the monkey-prince will afford a diverting relief after our solemn musings among mouldering ruins and crumbling monuments. We shall, doubtlessly, soon meet, as we are domesticated under the same roof; and thus an acquaintance so gaily commenced may be as cheerfully continued."

"I care little ever to meet him again;" said Sybil, dropping her beautiful head upon the shoulder of her husband, and looking up at him with one of those beaming smiles which always captivated his reason; "Every folly has its day, and becomes stale by repetition. Saviatti is too frivolous to leave one regret behind him."

"Did he visit England alone?" asked Frederic already half-appeased, as he bent down and kissed the fair forehead which was pillowed upon his bosom; "Was the monkey unaccompanied by his attendant bear?"

"Oh no! there was a tall, lean, sour-visaged abbate, who was in his train when he arrived in town; but I believe that the Prince wearied of the *espionage* to which he was condemned by the companionship of this saturnine individual, who

had been attached to his person by his father, and so gave him his dismissal ; for it is certain that he returned to Palermo only a few weeks after the advent of his principal."

" Saviatti is, then, a Palermitan ?"

" So I understand. But you appear singularly interested about this frivolous foreigner, Frederic !"

" Do you wonder that it should be so, Sybil ? Did he not know you, and apparently know you intimately, long before we had even met ?"

Mrs. Mortimer changed her position ; her cheek burnt, and she did not care to expose it to the observation of her husband.

" And do you believe that he, and such as he, could *ever* know me ?" she asked with a pretty affectation of scorn. " Do both yourself and me better justice, my dear Frederic. Saviatti knows me as he knows Rome ; he appreciates me as he appreciates the glories of the Parthenon and the sublimity of St. Peter's. And, apropos of this, what shall we do this evening ? Surely we came to the Imperial City for a better purpose than that of ' chronicling small beer ?' "

" Shall we visit the Coliseum ?"

" *Il Coliseo* ? Oh no ! Have you forgotten that the moon is at the full, and that it will swarm with fools ? Let us go there when it can be, if

not entirely, at least comparatively, our own. I loathe to witness the tricks of the travelled mountebank, upon the very spot where once gushed forth the proud blood from the panting arteries of the stricken gladiator, or the holy life-tide of the Christian captive. Do not even let us attempt the Villa Medici; we shall be elbowed by foreign Excellencies and crimson-stockinged Eminences; nor will that, in all probability, be the worst. Remember the list of names over which we have been pondering; and dread the encounter of this flight of northern locusts as you would the malaria of the Campagna."

"Whither *can* we go, then, to avoid them?" asked Frederic, once more appeased by the belief that all society had become importunate to Sybil which deprived her of his own. "Like the ravenous insects to which you have compared them, they will swarm in every direction."

"Have you ever visited the gardens of the Negroni?"

"Never."

"Will you devote your evening to me alone, without regret and without *ennui*."

"Not my evening only, but my whole existence!" replied Frederic tenderly.

Sybil laughingly placed her hand upon his lips.

“Wait until we are wandering in the delicious solitudes to which I am about to introduce you;” she said; “before you forget the husband in the lover. *There*, indeed, you will, or I greatly mistake you, be compelled to yield to the soft influence of the spot; about which we shall, in all probability, be permitted to ramble alone, as it has few attractions for the mere tourist, who seeks to see rather than to feel.”

“What a delicious prospect! And when shall we set forth?”

“Now, if you will. The sun is near its decline, and the hour is most propitious.”

And as Sybil spoke she passed to an inner apartment, whence she emerged a few moments afterwards, shawled and bonneted; and moreover, for the first time since her marriage, closely veiled. There was little fear that a man of pleasure like Saviatti would be found in the solitary recesses of the Negroni gardens; but even the risk, slight as it was, must be provided against; and congratulating herself upon her expedient for rendering “assurance doubly sure,” Mrs. Mortimer, as she hung gracefully upon the arm of her husband, and heard him thank her again and again for so delightful a suggestion, smiled half in triumph and half in scorn. The

evening would now pass away without any encounter with the Prince ; and she must trust to her tact to urge their early departure by every means in her power. She had ere this read her weak but devoted husband even to the heart's core ; and she well knew that his vanity was the lever by which she could at all times move him at her will.

Long before they reached the silent and shadowy gardens, and even while she listened, apparently rapt in interested attention, to some old travelling memory with which Mortimer was endeavouring to beguile the way, her whole plan was arranged, and she felt secure of its success.

To her it would be no sacrifice to abandon Rome if she also escaped Saviatti. She had been warned in time of his presence ; and she resolved to profit by the knowledge.

" We must leave Rome, and that speedily ;" she murmured to herself, as, with an exclamation of delight from Mortimer, they plunged into the thickest shades of the perfumed solitude, which to him promised an evening of intense and quiet happiness, and to her a few hours of insipidity and safety !

CHAPTER XVI.

FAIR and gracious reader, have you ever visited the Negrone Gardens at Rome? If not, be careful to bend your steps thitherward when you again find yourself a denizen of the lordly city, if you be one who loves that fantastic blending of the natural and the artistic, the present and the past, which speaks to the heart as well as to the senses; and affords a calm and soothing relief from the perpetual stir and excitement of the busy world by which you are surrounded.

The stamp of centuries was never more visibly impressed upon the mouldering remains of tower or battlement than it is upon the hoary trees and antique monuments of those far-reaching solitudes; above one of whose walls the Baths of Dioclesian may be seen, apparently coeval with the long lines of untrimmed cypresses, whose trailing branches scarcely admit the passage of an intruder among their mysterious depths; and the wild patches of bay, scenting the air with their luxurious perfume, as if in emulation of the

tangled masses of jasmine, starred with ten thousand blossoms; while, scattered on every side, at times half-buried amid the dense and vagrant vegetation, and at others rising in cold calm majesty upon some partially uninvaded spot, the wanderer encounters fragments of ancient architecture, of which the date, the purpose, and even the name of him who wrought them, are alike unknown; vases of quaint device and graceful chiseling; altars erected to the Manes, in those deep and silent nooks so appropriate to their worship; and sarcophagi, which teach, as we look upon them, the sublime majesty with which past ages invested the idea of man's apotheosis.

It is rare that even the cry of a passing bird disturbs the silence of these dreamy retreats; but there is a constant and mysterious voice among the leaves, as they heave or quiver to the passing wind; and a perpetual murmur of falling waters, trickling from the porphyry basins which they overflow, and stealing away beneath a network of rank grass and aquatic weeds by which their onward course is totally concealed. When the eye wanders upwards, and penetrates between the sturdy boughs of the ancient wood, it sees, shadowed upon the dense purple sky of evening, the massive domes, and tall, singularly shaped

tower of Santa Maria Maggiore; the worship of art is without those hoary walls; the worship of nature is within; for how much is there of holiness in such a scene—how much to exalt the soul, and to rebuke the pride!

For a while Sybil and Mortimer walked forward in silence. Both were too full of their own sensations to break the stillness by a word. To Frederic the whole wilderness was one of enchantment; his heart throbbed, and he pressed more closely to his side the hand which rested on his arm, without even remarking that the mute caress was not returned. The spirit of the spot was within him, and about him. Keenly alive to the grand and solemn in nature, he was absorbed by that rare and beautiful feeling of universal love which comes like a holy dream upon the heart only at those infrequent moments when every hope appears to be realised, and when it makes of its happiness one common crucible in which to blend and to purify every thing around it.

It is true that many individuals pass through life without either the opportunity or the necessary faculty for experiencing this enviable, and, alas! too transitory state of feeling. Hume has said, that "some people are subject to a certain delicacy of passions:" and Mortimer was precisely

such a person. Jealous of the affection of others, he was equally lavish of his own ; pure in taste, upright in principle, and tenacious of all which affected his honour, he was nevertheless supine in the ordinary interests of life ; he had neither ambition, nor a desire of wealth ; he lived rather in a self-created world of sensation than in that outward and material circle by which he was environed ; and he was consequently more readily influenced by purely personal circumstances than one who had diffused his hopes and his anxieties over a broader sphere of impulse and action.

Thus then, at the moment described, his heart and his aspirations were alike satisfied. He had won the woman whom he loved ; and, despite those passing shadows of misgiving which are the ordinary concomitants of strong and exacting passion, he nevertheless did not entertain a doubt that, on his part, he was equally beloved. Sybil was at his side, they trod together a path of silence and enchantment, and Mortimer was supremely happy.

And where had the thoughts of Sybil wandered ? Were they with the husband upon whose arm she leant ? Were they with the mother from whom she was for the first time separated ?—or did they linger upon that home of which she was so soon to become the presiding genius, and on those duties

which would hereafter devolve upon her? In sooth, they were occupied by none of these. As they turned from one avenue into another, a hasty glance first assured her that their solitude still continued uninvaded, and then her reflections fell back to the point at which they had momentarily paused.

For months Rome had been the object of all her wishes, as well as those of Mortimer; but from Rome she now felt that it was expedient they should depart at once, and the pretext for this apparent caprice was readily found. Yet, to return to Westrum—to bury herself in an obscure English county, of whose monotony she had already had dreary experience, now that her point was carried, and that the world was once more before her—revolted alike her vanity and her patience. And for whom was she required to do this? For a man whose supineness she despised, whose intellect she scorned, and of whose feelings she was careless. Sybil at once convinced herself that such a sacrifice was impossible. She was not formed for home, either by nature or by education; nor was she responsible for the mistake which her husband had wilfully committed, in supposing that the mere fact of becoming his wife could change alike her principles and her tastes.

That this mistake is of daily occurrence in the world, and perpetrated even by men of shrewd sense and habitual prudence upon other points, is certain; and that it will continue to be so is equally sure, so long as vanity and sensual gratification are suffered to silence the dictates of reason; but so trite a truth could offer no mitigation to the disappointment of a particular individual, and was assuredly not calculated to assuage that of a man of Mortimer's peculiar temperament.

From the very period of her enforced retirement from a world by which she had once been worshipped, Sybil had felt the most invincible desire to return to it, so soon as she should have secured a position which would enable her to revenge what she had never ceased to consider as its injustice. Accustomed to regard herself as one constituted to shine in whatever circle she might embellish by her presence, and caring little for the happiness of domestic life, and still less for the charm of domestic duties, she felt at home only in the midst of a crowd, and as the centre of admiration. The excitement which fatigues and exhausts a less ambitious nature, was to hers the very aliment on which it existed; and she looked forward to the prospect of reappearing in the

world, in the character of a wealthy married woman, with delight, as it would afford the opportunity of a social vengeance, well calculated to soothe her pride and to satisfy her ambition.

It was consequently upon speculations such as these that the thoughts of Sybil were engaged, amid the solemn shades threaded by Mortimer with tender veneration; nor was her reverie disturbed by a single word until they reached a spot so striking and picturesque, as to rouse even her companion from his trance of delight. They had traversed one of the cypress avenues from end to end; and then, striking into a lateral walk, fragrant with untended lemon-trees and vagrant honeysuckle, sheltered on its northern side by a thick belt of bay, and rendered fresh and verdant upon its other lip by one of those hidden rivulets of water already described, they suddenly came upon a small open space, in the centre of which stood an altar, moss-grown and hoary, where an eternal requiem was supplied by the overflowing of a capacious basin which was half veiled by the surrounding underwood, and the flexile leaves which trembled, as if in adoration, to the touch of the passing breeze.

“Beautiful!” exclaimed Frederic, as he suddenly paused, and claimed the attention of his

musings bride; "Where can we find a better halting-place? Here, Sybil, the world, and the world's follies, are indeed as nothing; and we may, for a few instants, be all in all to each other. With what exquisite judgment did our forefathers select the spots which they dedicated to the past affections and the past ties by which they had been linked to the loved and lost! How must the Manes, could they be conscious of the present, cherish a scene like this! Let us rest here awhile. See how luxurious a couch is spread for you beneath this thicket of bay, overarched by tall and stately cypress-trees!—the mossy turf yields to the foot more softly than the velvet carpets of a palace; the gurgling water and the awakened leaves are redolent of harmony; and we may here indulge in the full consciousness of a happiness which has nothing more to ask of destiny save its continuance."

"It is, indeed, a lovely retreat;" said Sybil, as she suffered herself to be established beside the brimming basin, whence the crystal waters escaped with a low murmur which lent a mystic voice to the solitude; "To be happy here, the spirit need only be at peace."

"Let us, then, be happy;" retorted the still enamoured husband, as he flung himself beside

her, and supported her slight figure with his encircling arm ; “ For are we, at least, not at peace ? Are we not well able to appreciate all its charm ? I love you in the world, Sybil ; in the crowd, where my protection and my support are necessary to your more delicate nature ; but in such a scene as this how doubly dear do you appear to me, where you are all my own, and we are alone with the sublime works of nature ! ”

“ Would that we could be ever thus, my best friend ! ” replied Sybil, with one of her most radiant smiles ; “ but, alas ! that is impossible. We owe ourselves to the world, which is a stern task-mistress, and will enforce their duties upon all her children. Even now, since we entered these gardens, I feel overwhelmed by a sense of my own individual responsibility ; I have become convinced that the path before me must not be perpetually strewn with roses. And when I think of you, Frederic ; of you, with all your glorious faculties, and manifold opportunities of good, I become almost sad with anxiety. You know how I love you ; for have I not given myself to you, despite the resolution of years, and the dictates which I had so long accustomed myself to regard as those of a calm and matured reason ? And yet, I confess that I would also

feel myself compelled to regard you with pride as well as affection ; I would see you just to yourself ; not shunning the world as an object either of scorn or alarm, but boldly taking your place among the foremost of those by whom its destinies are controlled."

"Sybil, you astonish me! What can I need more than I possess?—what can the world of which you speak add to my present happiness? Have I not wealth sufficient to ensure to you—and that alone can now be my consideration—all the luxuries of life? Is not my social station unexceptionable? Are not you my own? What have I now to do with ambition? My race of hope is run."

"Are you then content to die, and be forgotten?"

"Not by those who love me. Not by such as you, Sybil; but I care little for the memory of the world. Look around you. We are here almost on holy ground. This silent, and yet most eloquent monument, perpetuates the recollection of some departed one, but it identifies that recollection only for those who reared it. Thus would I have it myself. Rear for me an imperishable altar in your own heart, and I shall ask no worship which would entail a more conspicuous shrine."

"Let us, then, talk of life rather than death;"

said Sybil, with a sigh for which Mortimer felt grateful to her. "You are still too young to immure yourself in a country-house, limiting your duties to receiving rents and entertaining provincial parsons. Neither your tastes nor your acquirements fit you for occupations like these ; and I confess that I cannot see you reconcile yourself thus to fritter away your years and your faculties, without remorse and regret : remorse that my society may induce you to bear with such a fate ; and regret that you should not have chosen a nobler destiny."

"And how can I dispel such bitter feelings?" asked her bridegroom playfully ; "Shall I volunteer myself as prime minister, or try my fortune as commander-in-chief? Nevertheless;" he added more gravely ; "you surprise me greatly, Sybil ; for we have so frequently and so fondly talked together of the delights of a tranquil home, and the happiness of making that home the centre of benevolence and love, that I was unprepared for this change of sentiment in one by whom I believed that my thoughtful and somewhat indolent nature was thoroughly understood."

"Nor must you now misconceive me, Frederic;" replied Sybil somewhat anxiously ; "Before I became your wife I thought only, I dreamt only

of securing your affection, of having you constantly beside me, and of engrossing all the faculties of your soul ; but now that I know you better and prize you more ; now that egotism has become less prominent, and that I live in you rather than in myself, I have learnt to be jealous of your future destiny. I desire that others should understand and appreciate you as I do—that they should be compelled to acknowledge that what you will to do, you can accomplish ; in short, that you were never born to live and die a mere country gentleman, vegetating with your crops, and confining alike your ambition and your patriotism to the due payment of your taxes, and an annual speech at the county dinner.”

“What a malicious picture, Sybil !”

“Is it not correct in every feature ? And, meanwhile, who are you permitting to outstrip you in the race of life ? I will not speak of the great master-spirits of the age ; let them wear with honour the laurels that they have so nobly won ; but look at the herd of mere empty imitators, who make a reputation by the simple mimicry of their great models, as certain blocks of stone owe a voice to the sounds they do but echo ; and who, while only the shadows of a substance which they follow, conscious that

they have no other means of moral existence, are, nevertheless, included in the public eye as part and parcel of the being of the very leaders whom they imitate, even while they are unable to appreciate their powers. Are these, and such as these, crippled alike in means, in station, and in acquirements, to bear away the palm of the world's praise, while you look on supinely? Believe me, Frederic, you are destined to higher fortunes than those bequeathed to you by your ancestors."

"You are an enthusiast, Sybil, and because you love me, you imagine that I am equal to any emergency; but you forget that the very nature of my education has altogether unfitted me for the strife and struggle of the world. Home-usefulness has been the only aim and end of *my* ambition. I have tenantry and dependants to whom I owe all the exertion of which I am capable."

"Say rather, which you are disposed to make;" replied his fair wife somewhat impatiently; "But you should rouse yourself, Frederic, from so unseemly a state of moral lethargy. Your local duties are sacred only to a certain point; nor can they entail the necessity of self-sacrifice. You have a handsome property, it is true; but in this respect you only resemble hundreds of others, and

consequently that simple fact will afford you none of that personal distinction which is necessary to make a figure in the world. Moreover, you owe your present position to the energy and prudence of your ancestors; the contingency is purely adventitious, and, as yet, you have done nothing for yourself."

"What would you have me to do? My habits are formed; I am no longer young enough to brook control, nor am I so necessitous as to render it endurable."

Sybil laughed. "One would imagine;" she said playfully, for by the inflexion of her husband's voice she was at once aware that he was displeased by her pertinacity; "One would really imagine, my dear Frederic, that I proposed to induce you to enter into a merchant's office, or to purchase an ensign's commission. Is there not such a career as diplomacy, for instance, where at once you might avail yourself of your natural talents, and of your knowledge of continental habits and policy?—A career of which, possessed of such advantages as yours, it is impossible to prophesy the termination."

"And our home, Sybil?"

"Our home will be rendered prouder and happier by the distinction of its owner."

"But I have no influence with the Government, even were I to permit myself to indulge in such a vision."

"You have money; and a golden key unlocks every door in our dear treasure-worshipping England."

Frederic sighed as he glanced around him. How little had he anticipated such a discussion in that delicious solitude! For months had he talked with Sybil of the tranquil happiness of that ancestral home which she now so strenuously urged him to abandon. He was well aware that, once involved in public life, he should have little leisure for those calm and heart-satisfying pleasures which are never to be secured elsewhere; and he remembered, almost with a pang, that none of her previous arguments had prepared him for such an effort at self-abnegation. And yet, he was rather pained than angry. If she did indeed wish him to make so vast a sacrifice, was it not her love for him, her pride in him, which led her to forget that she was also, should she succeed in inspiring him with her views, sacrificing herself?

It was consequently with a sad smile that he pursued the subject, by reminding her that such an undertaking was beset with difficulties; that their comfort, their affection, and

their peace of mind, would be perilled for an uncertain result; while, even should all end favourably, they could never again be all in all to each other.

Sybil, however, had counter-arguments to advance, which, even if they were not conclusive, were at least flattering and plausible; but still Mortimer hesitated to pledge himself to a line of conduct so repugnant to his tastes.

"Enough of this for to-day, dearest;" he said, as he pressed to his lips the small hand which had remained clasped in his own throughout their dialogue; "Let us not further darken the present by anxiety for the future. Are we not in Rome, Sybil? And is it not profanation thus to wander away in thought from the glories by which we are surrounded?"

"You will think me very capricious, my own Frederic;" said his wife tenderly; "when I tell you that I already weary to return to England. I know by your start that you are surprised; but you must forgive me when I confess that not even your affection can make me forget a thousand anxieties—my mother, alone for the first time—the unsettled state of my unfortunately involved affairs. Do you know that I absolutely shudder when I reflect upon all the trouble and annoyance

which await you on my account, and shall have no real peace until all is arranged?"

"Leave Rome!" exclaimed Frederic, painfully impressed he knew not wherefore, by this sudden whim.

"I knew that you would be astonished, dear love;" said Sybil with well-acted humility; "but you must recollect, that however you may have exalted me in your own affectionate imagination, I am only a woman, after all; and then, remember that we can return whenever we wish to do so; and that, with a heart at ease, I shall be so much better able to give myself up to all the delights of such a sojourn. In short, you know not, Frederic;" she added in a low whisper, as she buried her face upon his shoulder; "how many, and what earnest reasons I have for wishing to return at once to England."

"Is it in order to congratulate me upon my forthcoming embassy?" asked Mortimer, forcing a smile; but before she could reply they were suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted.

"I am sure that I cannot be mistaken;" exclaimed a voice which appeared to rise out of the ground immediately beside them, as a figure emerged from behind a tangled mass of bay-trees, and advanced rapidly towards the spot where they

were seated: "I am quite sure that I see, or that, at least, I hear, Miss Delamere."

The words were English, but the accent in which they were uttered was decidedly foreign; and the change of position necessitated by so abrupt an apparition, enabled Sybil to conceal from her husband the emotion which they had elicited, as, extending her hand, she answered with wonderful self-command; "Your ear has not deceived you, Prince; and we are, indeed, fated to meet again at Rome."

"No matter where;" was the reply, as the speaker clasped the offered hand, and then threw himself upon the grass beside her; "No matter where, so that, as you say, we meet again. Are you long from England?"

"About two months: and you?"

"Oh, I? I really scarcely know—I hardly recollect—I remember nothing since we parted; since you—"

"Prince," interposed Mrs. Mortimer hastily; "allow me to present to you—my husband."

"*Corpo di Bacco!*" ejaculated the intruder as if unconsciously; but in the next instant he recovered himself, and, with considerable dignity, replied with a low bow; "I am honoured. Sir, I congratulate you; I understand all now; and,

perhaps, I should apologize—but two months—two whole months—that will be my excuse; and you will forgive my indiscretion.”

Mortimer bowed in his turn.

“The Prince Saviatti, my dear Frederic, of whom I have spoken to you;” said Sybil with one of her sweetest smiles.

“Ha! Madame has spoken of me;” pursued the foreigner; “I am, it is impossible to be more, flattered. We are, then, old acquaintance. Do you stay long in Rome, Sir?”

“We are as yet undecided;” replied the young husband, irritated he knew not wherefore by the cool and self-satisfied manner of the intruder.

“Oh, then, I shall have the honour to decide you;” was the rejoinder. “Madame and I are such old and good friends, and we have so much to talk over, and we shall be so glad to come together again in this charming manner. I know this old Rome of ours now, *de bout en blanc*, and I shall have the happiness to be your *cicerone*, and to be always beside you.”

Mortimer involuntarily shrank back; the easy hyper-courtesy of his new acquaintance revolted his English reserve.

“We have here many of your old acquaintance, Mademoiselle — *c’est-à-dire*, Madame” — resumed

the Prince; "And ha!—it is a sad pity, but you have just come one little day too late to see Trevor. He went yesterday—he would go yesterday: I could not stop him. He is like you: he forgets old times; and he goes home to your foggy England to fetch his wife."

"His wife!"

"Yes, yes; he is determined at last to play the *pastor fido*. Poor Trevor! he makes a grand mistake—don't you see it as I do? But he had so little choice. He was pretty near what you call in London 'cleared out;' couldn't get on, you know, and so—married. Perhaps he was right; and I consoled him with this; 'Bad enough,' I said, 'but better than worse; a rich wife is always better than an empty purse.'"

"Will you never reform?" asked Sybil with affected playfulness.

"I must;" was the prompt reply; "since you and Trevor have presented me with so charming an example—so encouraging a model. Perhaps I may even marry a rich wife myself—when there is no other hope left for me."

"You are ungallant, Prince;" said Mrs. Mortimer, resolutely concealing her annoyance.

"Not at all; for I cannot hope to find a second Miss Delamere. See now—I find you here alone

with Monsieur——” he paused for an instant; but as Sybil did not pronounce the name of her husband, which he had evidently awaited, he pursued in the same tone; “absolutely alone in this solitude, while other married pairs are congregated in the Coliseo, or the Parthenon, or St. Peter’s—Is it not enough to make me despair? I always suspect the couples who are so anxious to *afficher leur bonheur*; while you disarm me by your evident desire to escape the crowd. Monsieur is too happy—Who will not envy him his triumph!”

Mortimer writhed beneath a familiarity which he felt to be almost insolent. It was not thus that he had approached Sybil: that he had won her. He could not brook that she should be subjected to what he considered as an affront to her dignity; and he was about to make some caustic remark, when he was interrupted by the Prince, who, as he reclined upon the ground almost at the feet of his fair friend, languidly striking a costly cane mounted with gems against his polished boot, asked carelessly—

“And how long do you stay in Rome, Madame? I am here for the next three months, and—always with the permission of Monsieur—I shall ask you to do the same. You will be well amused. We

shall have plenty to occupy us in the present; and we have so much to talk over, and—who knows?—to remedy in the past.”

“We leave the day after to-morrow;” said Sybil resolutely.

“Tyrant!” laughed the Prince; “You want to be persuaded—entreated—”

“I do not always yield either to persuasion or entreaty;” and the tone of Mrs. Mortimer grew still more cold and repelling.

“True—not always;” conceded M. Saviatti with undiminished composure; “but sometimes—you will not deny that sometimes you are not inexorable. See—I am at your feet—and I pray you to retract your threat.”

“Our plans are decided.”

“Bah!” ejaculated the Prince sarcastically; “Monsieur, married since two or three months, must be accustomed to see you change your mind. I have not, unhappily, the right to ask that you should once more do so at my request, but the tastes of your sex are so variable that I may at least hope. Why should *you*, Madame;” and there was a shade of mockery in his tone as he proceeded; “why should *you* desire to stand alone, and to declare your will immutable? Do you hope that, knowing all your other perfections, any one will con-

sent to believe so enormous a solecism? No, no; when I have the honour to meet you to-morrow, you will say to me frankly; 'Prince, I have repented my idle resolution, and I am for three months in Rome.'

"I attach no faith to your prophecy."

"We shall see."

Mortimer had with difficulty restrained his indignation, but the evident displeasure of Sybil had so far moderated his momentarily-increasing annoyance as to enable him to control his feelings.

The last impertinent rejoinder of Saviatti was, however, more than he could support; and, suddenly springing up, he extended his hand to assist his wife, as he said with affected calmness,—

"Sybil, the air is becoming damp. I cannot allow you to remain longer exposed to its influence. Prince, I have the honour to wish you a good evening."

"Not at all, Monsieur; not at all;" said the pertinacious foreigner; "Madame and I are old friends; I will accompany you"—and, rising in his turn, he prepared to put his purpose into execution.

"You will excuse me;" said Mortimer, suddenly stopping short, and forcing his words through his clenched teeth; "I am this lady's

husband: for my sake she has been good enough to forget, or at least to resign, all past friendships; and, as you and I are total strangers, you will do me a favour by permitting us to return alone."

"Oh, Monsieur, by all means—by all means in the world;" replied the Prince, with an affectation of ceremonious courtesy which became a sarcasm from its excess. "I owe you ten thousand apologies; and I know so well the value of Madame's society, that I am conscious, very conscious, of my error. I have the honour to salute you both; and to make you my sincere compliment on your marriage." And so saying, Saviatti raised his hat, bowed profoundly, and moved forward with a brisk step; humming as he went one of the popular airs of the day.

"Sybil;" demanded Mortimer sternly, when they were once more alone; "what is the meaning of what has just passed?"

"The meaning;" replied his wife with an impatient shrug of the shoulders; "the meaning simply is that you have been 'sprited by a fool; sprited and angered worse;' and that, by your want of self-command, you have made us the proverb of Rome."

"Be it so;" said Mortimer; "a few hours

will suffice for us to leave the ridicule behind. We will abide by your decision, and return at once to England."

"You are strangely discomposed, Frederic."

"I do not wish to conceal it. Oh, Sybil!" he continued vehemently; "did you know, could you imagine, the proud confidence with which I have always looked upon you—Were you able to estimate the resolute scorn with which I have flung from me every suspicion of that past which you so pertinaciously conceal—the absorbing affection which I have poured out at your feet—you would comprehend what I have suffered during the last hour."

"Am I to understand that you are weak enough to be jealous, Frederic?"

"Perhaps so—but that is not all. I tremble to perceive that my faith in you is shaken; that I am under the influence of some inexplicable misgiving—that, in short, I shall never again feel safe in your affection, until you lay the whole past before me, frankly and confidently."

"Frederic—Mr. Mortimer;" exclaimed Sybil indignantly, as she turned her flashing eyes full upon him: "Am I to be made the sacrifice, because an idle babbler sees fit to vent his inanities upon me? Had I not already told you that I

knew this man?—That he was an empty coxcomb, living only for himself, and making his rank an excuse for his absurdities? Would it have been more delicate, more honourable in me to have betrayed his secret, as you now compel me to do—and to have met your questioning with the reply that he had loved me? Let it suffice that you are now in possession of this mighty secret; and that the rejected suitor will not fail to amuse all Rome before noon to-morrow, at the expense of the jealous husband.”

END OF VOL. II.





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